SFX
SFX 30 YEARS
THE WALKING DEAD
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THE CONJURING
TIME FOR LAST RITES
THE TOXIC AVENGER
TROMA'S HERO IS BACK
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TRUTH. JUSTICE. THE AMERICAN EAGLE
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RETURN TO NEVERMORE!
WEDNESDAY
SPOOKY SECRETS OF SEASON TWO!
PLUS! DARK UNIVERSE | THE LONG WALK | PREDATOR INVASION | SKY | GODZILLA | THOR | BUCKY O'HARE!

FUTURE
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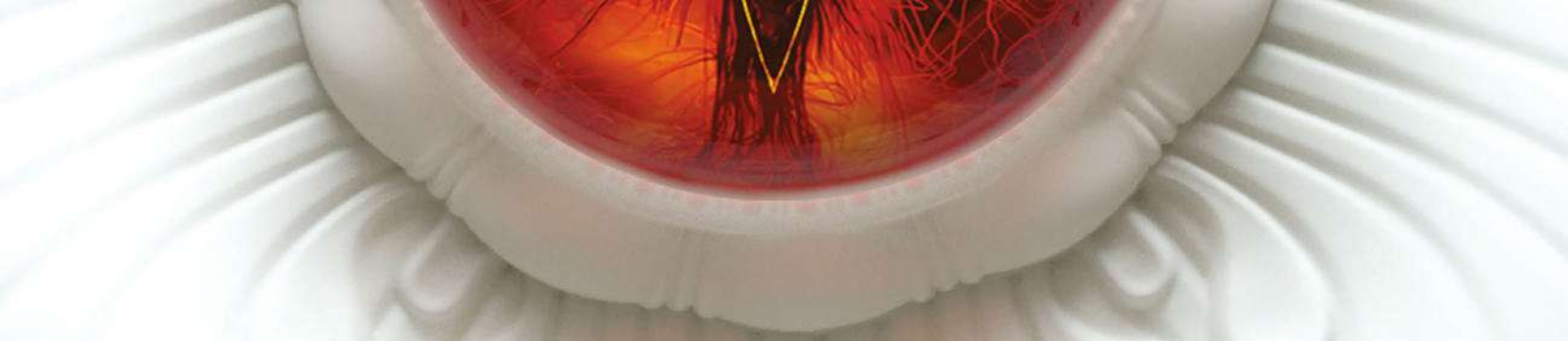


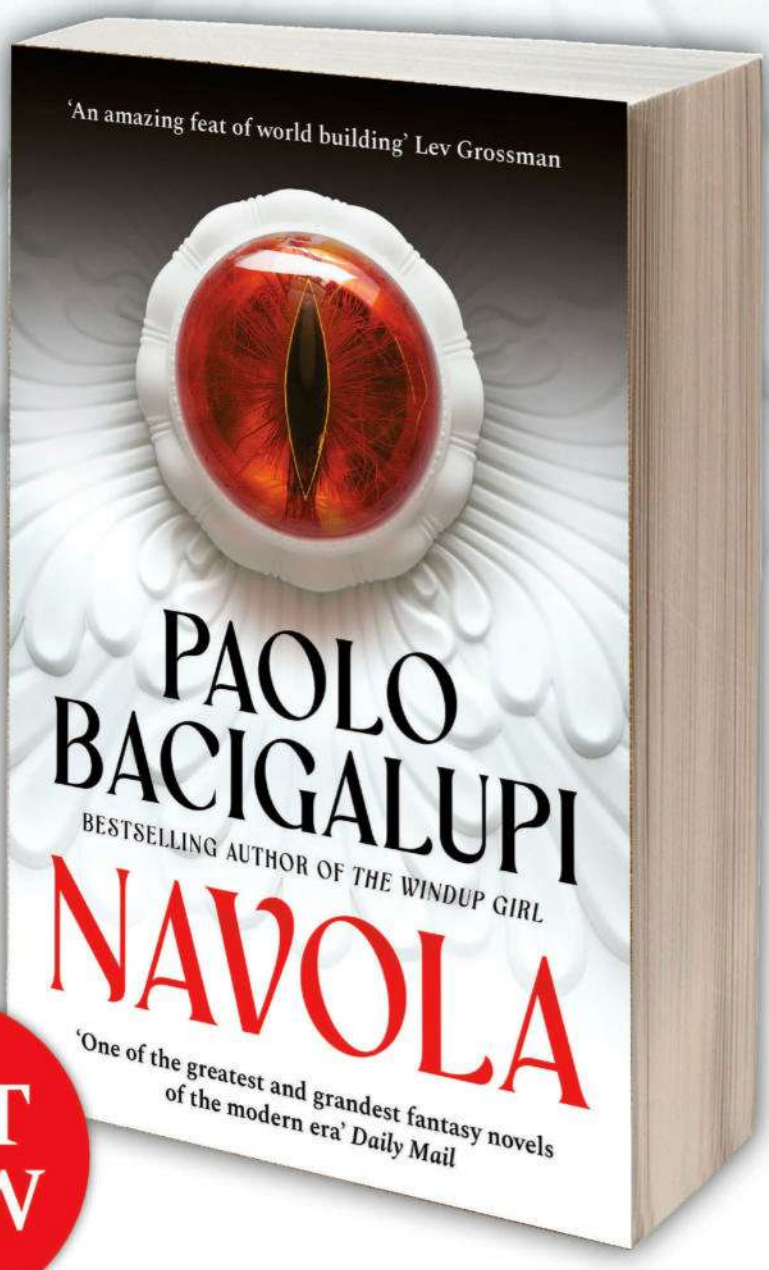
High renaissance politics, black vengeance and dragon magic, *Navola* is a towering fantasy landmark from the award-winning author of *The Windup Girl*.

'One of the amazing feats of worldbuilding which I've encountered this year, or really in the last few years'

Lev Grossman

'Gorgeously detailed and utterly immersive... Nothing short of a masterpiece'

Daily Mail


'An amazing feat of world building' Lev Grossman
PAOLO BACIGALUPI
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE WINDUP GIRL
NAVOLA
'One of the greatest and grandest fantasy novels of the modern era' Daily Mail

'Steeped in poison, betrayal, and debauchery, reading *Navola* is like slipping into a luxurious bath full of blood'

Holly Black

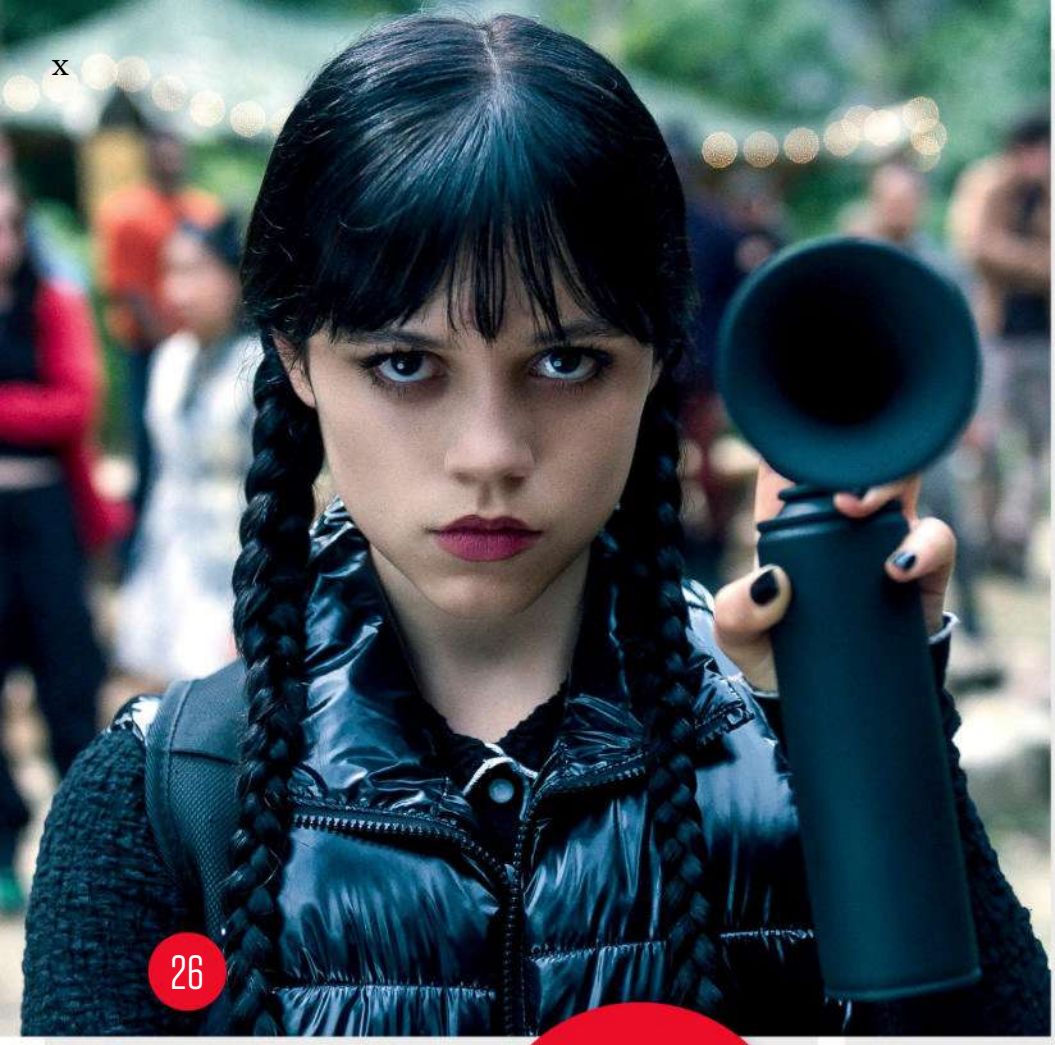
'Medici Florence meets Tony Soprano's New Jersey - with a delicious dash of high fantasy and a heavy splattering of blood'

Dan Jones

OUT NOW

AD ASTRA

HEAD OF ZEUS



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Remembering *Bucky O'Hare*.

Captain's Log

Back once more within the walls of Nevermore Academy – finally. It's been a long wait for season two of *Wednesday*, but worth it. In fact, we once again seem to have taken an altogether spookier turn this issue, and that's not just because we're heading towards the autumn months faster than a family can click their fingers. So let me just address that...

At the moment, a lot of films and television shows seem to be skewing towards either superheroes and horror. While that's great, it doesn't look quite so even when film studios can't arrange access for us to things on the superhero side of the equation. Then you even get some streamers – cough, let's call them a fruitier one – that want coverage of a sci-fi show to go out on the day it's released, which isn't possible for a monthly magazine. So what are we left with? Our faithful friends on the darker side of entertainment, who are only too happy to talk horror with us. And yes, while I do love horror personally, I'm trying my hardest to get more of an even mix. So fear not, next month we *do* have lots of sci-fi, superheroes and, yes, a little bit of horror. A tad more sci-fi in the production process too wouldn't go amiss, but I'm always going to say that, right?

Darren X

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WEDNESDAY © NETFLIX

Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Loving *Alien: Earth* so far – an interesting new take where the scares keep ramping up as you go.
→ *Predator: Badlands* looks *awesome*.
→ I am, obviously, beside myself with excitement for *Halloween Horror Nights*.

RANTS

→ There are some genuinely great content creators online, but studios need to stop allowing any old fool with "followers" access to talent during press tours.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Hard-bitten old cynic as I am, I was genuinely thrilled to see a pic from the table-read of the new *Buffy* pilot.
→ Looking forward to the new Radiance Blu-ray releases of *Daughters Of Darkness* and *Malpertuis*.

RANTS

→ Publishers of fantasy books: please stop using flowery patterns on the covers. It's a very boring trend.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ The *FF* movie has suddenly switched my enthusiasm for the MCU back up to 11!
→ Watching Christopher LLoyd in anything is always a thrill and I'm particularly excited about him coming to *Wednesday*. If anyone can convince as a crazy head in a jar it's that man!
→ Flipping a gingerbread house upside down and packaging it with *Stranger Things* branding is absolute genius.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ Check out *Into The Sharkiverse*, an Archive On 4 documentary on BBC Sounds. A fun investigation into the movies that *Jaws* spawned.

RIP

→ Sorry to hear of the passing of writer and researcher Dave Rogers. His books on *The Avengers* were essential reading for us fans in the '80s.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ Very excited for *The Vampire Lestat*, the season three remix of *Interview With The Vampire*. The series keeps surprising.

RANTS

→ *Resident Alien* deserved five seasons. Heart, incredible laughs and an incredible ensemble. The cancellation is some bullshit!

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

SEPTEMBER 2025

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CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

ART ATTACK

How the *Terrifier* franchise will tear up Halloween Horror Nights

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INVASION

→ Humanity is still under threat in the third season of the Apple TV+ sci-fi drama.

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SKY

→ The Bob Baker and Dave Martin '70s sci-fi serial is back courtesy of Big Finish Productions.

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THE HAPPINESS PATROL

→ Return to Terra Alpha with a new comic series based on the *Doctor Who* story.

A new danger presents itself in season three.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Waiting Game

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Co-creator Simon Kinberg says **Invasion**'s third season will explore the enemies within

FOR TWO SEASONS OF *Invasion*, the Apple TV+ sci-fi series created by Simon Kinberg (*The Martian*, *X-Men: Days Of Future Past*) and David Weil (*Hunters*, *Citadel*), humanity grappled with the imminent arrival of hostile aliens coming to Earth. Around the globe, we followed key figures who work together to figure out how to prevent the destruction of our world as they glean as much as they can about the mothership in orbit, and how to infiltrate it.

In the season two cliffhanger, the global counterstrike against the alien powers is facilitated by Mitsuki Yamato (Shioli Kutsuna), who exerts her mental powers to open a portal into the mothership which allows Trevante Cole (Shamier Anderson) and Caspar Morrow (Billy Barratt) to strike a blow against the aliens from within. At the start of season three, audiences get to see the outcome of their efforts, which has had a massive impact on the planet, the aliens and the ship that was threatening Earth.

Kinberg tells Red Alert that he's particularly excited that this season allows them to bring their disparate characters together for a unified story against their common foe. That happens through a time jump that is set to shake up the narrative in some shocking ways.

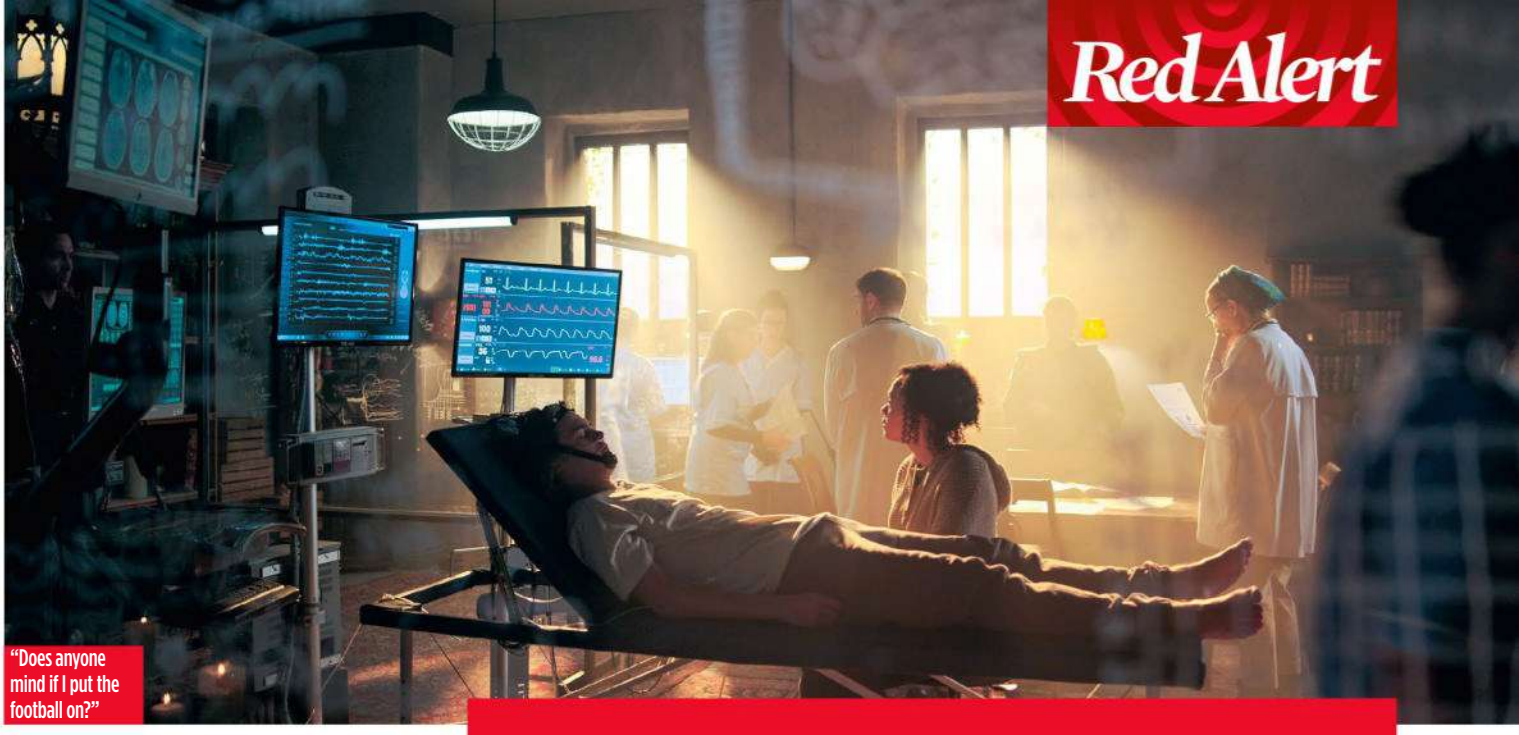
"I got really inspired by the way that *The Last Of Us* told its stories in the first season," Kinberg says of what guided them creatively this time round. "I wanted to be able to look at all our different characters who've all suffered in some way and see how they're handling it, and how they're trying to move on, or are not able to move on in a world that seems like it's peaceful. Right in the middle of all of those processes, they're thrown back into not only the continuation of the invasion in an escalated way, but the responsibility to actually man up on a mission and have to go into the heart of the thing that is the most scary to them."

As the new season begins, core characters like Trevante, Mitsuki, Jamila Huston (India Brown), Aneesha (Golshifteh Farahani) and Clark (Enver Gjokaj) will give audiences insight into what's happened since the mothership was infiltrated and set up the path forward where the military and bureaucracies are even more controlling than before.

> **"I was really excited about creating a new strand of threat"**

"I felt like I hadn't really seen too much, in alien invasion or occupation stories, of the idea of human villains," Kinberg says of having more terrestrial threats this time out. "Sure, there are cults in zombie shows, but I hadn't seen it like this, and so I was really excited about creating a whole new strand of threat and villainy this season that wasn't just extraterrestrial."

Kinberg shares that actors Eric Lange (*Lost*) and Erika Alexander (*Shining Girls*) join the series as



"Does anyone mind if I put the football on?"

Aaron Pearl plays General Bryant.

Shamier Anderson as Trevante Cole (left).

Caspar Morrow (Billy Barratt) gets hands-on.

the face of that human villainy this season, and their characters will challenge our existing heroes as they reassemble to face the burgeoning threat once more.

For those asking why, exactly, are these aliens so relentless in their conquest of humanity, Kinberg confirms that there's a huge reveal about them this season that will provide some much sought-after answers.

If your kid brings this home, panic.

"Not just why they're here, but that the aliens that we've experienced in the first two seasons are part of an organism that is bigger than what we've seen," Kinberg says. "I'm excited that a lot of the mystery about that and the mystery of the aliens takes place in and around this mothership, which plays a very critical role in this season as a setting, as a destination, as a target, and as a source of incredible jeopardy.

"The idea that there's something that has crashed into Earth that becomes central to the entire season... That's very different than anything that we've done on this show and anything I've seen in alien invasion stories in TV and films," Kinberg continues. "Here you have an alien ship that has had a massive impact on the world and is continuing to unleash waves of new attacks."

If audiences continue to respond to what Kinberg and Weil bring to the table with *Invasion*, their goal of a four-to-five-season run is still on the cards.

"What I always hoped for this show, and what I continue to be excited about, is that you could tell tons of stories because these characters are really interesting, human characters," Kinberg says. "If you care about the characters, there's almost an infinite amount of storytelling to be had with them, and that's always been the focus. It's always come from a place of, 'What do we want the characters to experience this season?', as much as, 'What do we want the super plot of the season to be?'"

Invasion is on Apple TV+ from 22 August.

SCI-FACT! **As well as co-creating *Star Wars Rebels* and *Invasion*, Kinberg also developed the 2019 revival of *The Twilight Zone*.**

SCI-FACT! **SFX director Teruyoshi Nakano said Mechagodzilla was designed to look as if "you took a tin toy of Godzilla and hammered its curved lines down".**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Lizard King

IDW takes **Godzilla** across the Earth and the galaxy with the Ka-Sei Era shared universe

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE HE'S CURRENTLY battling both Marvel and DC heroes – plus King Kong – in separate miniseries, the King of the Monsters is now also featuring in a new comics line at IDW. The Kai-Sei Era (kai-sei is explained as meaning "strange beast energy") begins with *Godzilla* and *Godzilla: Escape The Deadzone*, before continuing with *Starship Godzilla*.

"The shared universe opens up a Pandora's box of storytelling possibilities," says Ethan S Parker, who teams up with artist Griffin Sheridan on *Escape The Deadzone*. "As a reader, you may start to feel like there are only a certain number of ways to approach a kaiju story, but the Kai-Sei Era blows the doors wide open! All the classic monster clashes you love are here, but after those battles, there are places like the Deadzone left behind. The cosmos is filled with *Godzilla* stories, and all of these tales feed into each other to create a world that's living and breathing, and it truly feels like anything can happen."

Set in 2025, Tim Seeley and Nikola Čižmešija's *Godzilla* follows a boy called Jacen as he joins G-Force's ongoing battle against Godzilla and the ever-evolving kaiju threat. "Ours is the flagship book in that it most closely stars Godzilla," explains Seeley. "The King is in every issue, as this is about the American G-Force team tasked with stopping Godzilla from stomping on US soil. We'll see some great Toho characters and kaiju, and Jet Jaguar and Anguirus even appear in the first issue."

With Parker describing it as "the grittiest of the line-up", *Escape The Deadzone* takes place in the dangerous wasteland

Nikola Čižmešija's cover art for *Godzilla* #1.

It wouldn't be Godzilla without a good old rampage.

that was once the American Pacific Northwest. "This is where the grossest weirdos and most disturbing monsters in this universe roll around in the mud," he laughs. "You never know what's around any given corner, but the thing about such a brutal world is that beauty inevitably sprouts from the cracks, so you'll also get to see these extremely lovable folks throughout that are just trying to survive."

"We're having so much fun, which is equal parts introducing new characters to the *Godzilla* mythos and playing with our own personal favourites of the established kaiju," adds Sheridan. "It was tricky, but there's a couple of familiar faces that will be fun for fans."

> **"We'll see some great Toho characters and kaiju... Jet Jaguar and Anguirus appear"**

Written by Chris Gooch and illustrated by Oliver Ono, *Starship Godzilla* centres on a crew of mercenaries travelling through space in Mechagodzilla. "It's like a mix between *Cowboy Bebop* and *Guardians Of The Galaxy*, but set in a universe filled with massive, weird and terrifying kaiju – both old and new – as our antagonists for the first six issues are the best-dressed aliens from Godzilla's past," says Gooch, who has included connections to both *Godzilla* and *Deadzone*, despite *Starship* being set light years from Earth.

"We've worked hard to make sure *Starship Godzilla* fits in with the rest of the universe," he continues. "Though setting our book in deep space also gives us a chance to try a bunch of new, weird stuff we haven't seen in Godzilla before."

Godzilla and Godzilla: Escape The Deadzone are out now. Starship Godzilla is out on 1 October.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Some of Jonathan Wayshak's gruesome art.

Undead End

The vampires are keeping it in the family in Mike Carey's new comic **Cul-De-Sac**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

LARGELY ABSENT FROM comics for the past few years as he focused on his novels published under the name MR Carey, Mike Carey is back with *Cul-De-Sac*, a new miniseries from Bad Idea. Illustrated by Jonathan Wayshak, the five-parter explores many of the same themes as his recent prose fiction.

"I'm going through a phase where I'm mostly retelling love stories that I love or have loved at different times in my life," Carey tells Red Alert. "My last novel *Once Was Willem* is kind of a medieval *Seven Samurai*, while my next is a reinvention of *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, and the one after that riffs on a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, 'The Tinderbox'."

Centring on a trio of vampire families living inconspicuously in suburbia, Carey approaches the traditional vampire narrative from a different angle. "I've created a lot of lore relating to different vampire clans and the relationships between them," he explains. "The main characters in *Cul-De-Sac* are not classic vampires. They belong to a separate evolutionary lineage, the Necuratil, that has a very problematic relationship both with vampires and humans, and they're dangerous to both and they prey on both. That's a big part of the pleasure when you tackle a monster mythos that's been around for as long as this. You want to give the audience some surprises but at the same time you're scratching a well-defined itch, so it has to be an amalgam of the familiar and the unexpected."

Previously unaware of their parents' undead nature, *Cul-De-Sac*'s young protagonists are confronted with the literal life-or-death dilemma of whether to become bloodsuckers themselves before the decision is taken out of their hands by the arrival of some elite vampire hunters. "You can definitely see it as a coming of age story, or a story about coming into a family inheritance – not in the sense of inherited wealth, but in terms of taking on the weight and the burden of your family's history. At the start of the story, these kids have no idea who or what they are, and they all react to the news in different ways. It sends them all on their own journeys, with all that emotional challenge being hugely complicated by the fact that they're being hunted by two different groups of killers."

With the police and fellow vampires also pursuing the kids, the hunters soon become the hunted. "The reversals are in play all the way through the story," adds Carey. "And it's not a case of either/or – the title of the first chapter is 'All That Eat Are Eaten', and it's very much about food chains and chains of predation. From one point of view, the Necuratil are apex predators, but that doesn't mean they have things all their own way. And our vampire hunters have their own distinct motivations too. They're not all in this game for the same reasons, and they don't all have the same priorities. There are a lot of confused and conflicted allegiances and everything is up for grabs."

Cul-De-Sac is out now.

SCI-FACT! ***Cul-De-Sac*'s Cursed Mirror variant has front and back covers that work together when viewed in a mirror.**

Let's play "Spot the Allegory". Anyone?

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Alien Superstar

Cult '70s TV show **Sky** is reborn with Big Finish

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"*SKY* HAS NEVER LEFT ME," SAYS Gary Russell, writer, director and co-producer of a new Big Finish audio drama that resurrects one of TV's most compellingly otherworldly characters.

"It's had so much influence on me and everything I've done professionally. I look at so much of my writing, and there are always fragments of *Sky*. There's always something about ley lines and dragon paths and Stonehenge and weird aliens with sexy eyes!"

Broadcast in 1975, HTV's *Sky* was the tale of the boy who fell to Earth, an aloof, psychically empowered extraterrestrial stranded in the wrong time. Rejected as a planetary intruder by nature itself, this uncanny visitor joins with a trio of local youths, including Arby Vennor, who receives the gift of Sky's cosmic power in the serial's closing moments – a tantalising story thread Russell was intrigued to explore.

"I've had this story in my head since 1975. What effect does Sky's power have on an ordinary human being?"

The original seven-part serial was created by Bob Baker and Dave Martin, writers of such classic *Doctor Who* stories as "The Three Doctors", as well as 1977's equally disquieting HTV West production *King Of The Castle*. As Russell tells Red Alert, Baker was interested in revisiting *Sky* before his death in 2021.

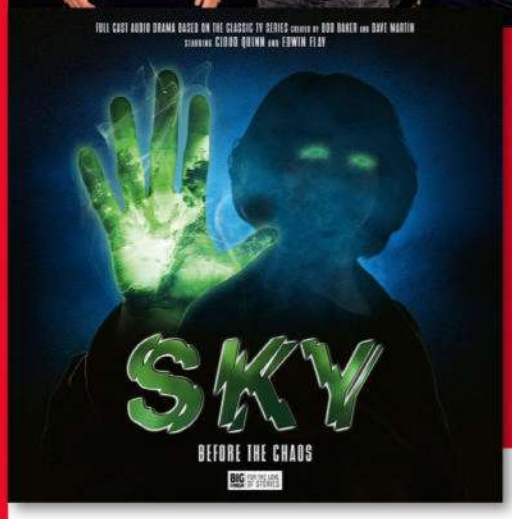
> **"What effect does Sky's power have on an ordinary human being?"**

"Bob, before he passed away, talked about it to Big Finish, I believe. The family have been brilliant about it. It's taken a couple of years to happen, but I knew exactly what I wanted to do with it: I wanted to do a sequel. I don't like doing remakes. What's the point? If you're going to play with something then you've got to treat it with

Meet the team who will be bringing back *Sky* via Big Finish.

Robert Eddison as Goodchild in the original HTV serial.

INSIDE BRIAN MOORE's ON THE BALL
Look-in
GREAT NEW SCI-FI ADVENTURE SERIES
SKY
STARTS ON TV
ALSO INSIDE TOMORROW PEOPLE PICTURE STRIP!
MEET HELLO
NEW WOODY COLOUR PIN-UP!
PLUS PART 2 OF THE HOLLIES HISTORY OF POP



respect and do the next step. You don't just regurgitate."

Baker had his own thoughts on *Sky*'s place in the 21st century. "Bob had said, 'Can you imagine if he went on chat shows and became a sort of superstar?' I thought, as a concept, that's a really smart idea. If the Second Coming happened now and someone said, 'I'm Jesus', the first thing they're going to be on is *Loose Women*! The days of Martin Bashir interviewing Princess Diana are long gone. Now, if Jesus turned up they would stick him on *Loose Women* or *Gogglebox* or *Strictly Come Dancing*. That's what we do with famous celebrities we don't really understand.

"I thought that was an interesting idea from Bob, so I used a bit of that, but took it in different directions. I thought of a reason why someone might want to put Sky on television, if someone was looking to use his power."

Featuring a brand new cast, volume one of *Sky*, *Before The Chaos*, is a three-episode box set. Volume two, *Into The Chaos*, is scheduled to follow in June 2026. Big Finish newcomer Cloud Quinn plays Sky. And yes, that's Cloud. Playing Sky...

"Do you know, that hadn't occurred to me!" Russell laughs. "No, that didn't come into it. I just wanted an interesting voice. I was going through various agencies that deal specifically with non-binary and trans people, and I heard this voice and I thought, 'There's the resonance, there's the neutrality I want.'

"One thing I didn't ask Cloud to do in any way, shape or form was imitate Marc Harrison [who played Sky in the 1975 serial]. I wanted them to find their own way into this. But Cloud sat down and watched all of *Sky*, loved it, then came in and did a pitch-perfect impersonation of Marc Harrison – which is not their natural voice. The moment they did it I went, 'Yeah, actually that really works...' It's got that Bowiesque quality."

Once again, Sky finds himself encountering the deadlier side of nature. But as Russell tells Red Alert, don't mistake this for some timely parable of man's problematic relationship with the planet.

"What I've always found interesting about *Sky* – and I was guilty of this as well, many years ago – is that everyone describes it as an ecological thriller, foreseeing Earth being damaged. And it bloody isn't! The main villain of the story is ecology. There is nothing good about planet Earth in this story. The planet does everything it can to kill the hero! It's not saying 'We must protect the planet' at all.

"If plant life had access to sentience we would be dead very, very quickly. And that is the main thrust of my version of *Sky*. *Sky*'s back, but the trees aren't just attacking him. The trees are attacking everything. I thought I needed to take that concept of the animus one step further. Make it bigger. Make it even more devastating.

"Nature is the enemy. Don't trust the trees!"

Only someone otherworldly could have hair that immaculate.

Sky: Before The Chaos is released on 21 August from Big Finish.

ITV/SHUTTERSTOCK

SCI-FACT! In 2015, Bob Baker adapted the original *Sky* serial into a novel for Fantom Publishing.

SCI-FACT! **Before Marvel and 20th Century Fox were owned by Disney, Predator previously crossed over with Batman, Superman and the JLA.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Big Game

Earth's Mightiest Heroes meet their match in **Predator Kills The Marvel Universe**

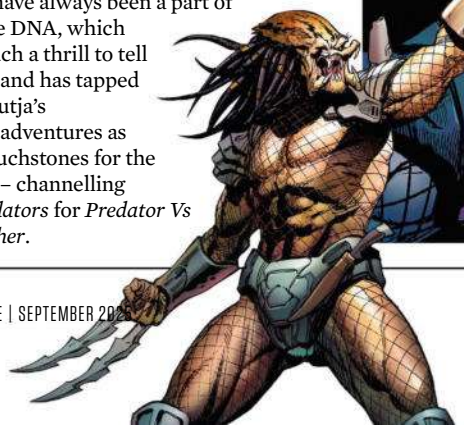
WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Leinil Francis Yu's cover art for #2.

AFTER SEPARATELY BATTLING Wolverine, Black Panther and Spider-Man, intergalactic hunters the Yautja are now taking on all of Earth's Mightiest Heroes in *Predator Kills The Marvel Universe*. After the individual confrontations of the previous miniseries, this new four-parter is more of a traditional crossover-style slugfest.

"The scope is vast and the feel is also different," says writer Benjamin Percy, who is reunited with *Predator Vs Spider-Man* artists Marcelo Ferreira and Jay Leisten. "But we're also doing our best to create individual stories within the larger one that will anchor the reader with heart, hope and grief – even as this massive earth-shaking scenario plays out."

Percy says he "was raised on a steady diet of Predator and Marvel lore, so both of these universes have always been a part of my creative DNA, which makes it such a thrill to tell this story," and has tapped into the Yautja's big-screen adventures as creative touchstones for the past series – channelling 2010's *Predators* for *Predator Vs Black Panther*.



However, with this series he is instead evoking the colourful, chaotic blockbuster spirit of a Marvel movie. "Anyone who reads *Predator Vs Spider-Man* will note the *Predator 2* vibes with the heat, the cityscape and the subway scenes," he continues. "But in the case of *Predator Kills The Marvel Universe*, it's charting its own course because this is storytelling on an epic scale and we haven't seen a global warfare scenario in a Predator film yet. If anything, it has a more Marvel event flavour and might be compared to something like *Avengers: Endgame*."

Stating that "the Marvel roster is deep, but we're doing our best to include a lot of the major players", Percy refuses to reveal which other characters play a significant part in what unfolds, although he does confirm that Wolverine, Black Panther and Spider-Man all reappear. "I don't want to give too much away, but after showing up in *Predator Vs Spider-Man*, Kraven the Hunter again plays an essential role as does a character we're calling Predator X, who is outfitted with Weapon X technology," he teases. "There are other elements seeded in the Wolverine and Black Panther stories that carry over as well. And any nerds out there who are wringing their hands over whether a Predator could take on some of Marvel's finest, I refer you to two essential elements. First, the end of *Predator Vs Spider-Man*. And secondly, the Yautja now have a massive store of Wakandan vibranium in their arsenal. They're obsessed with weapons and tech, and godmetal – as they call it – has levelled them up."

Also declining to reveal the identity of the Predators' mysterious human ally, Percy promises that the Yautja's invasion of Earth in this out-of-continuity tale results in an appropriately high death toll. "The title is *Predator Kills The Marvel Universe* and we're not holding back!" he laughs. "You'll know this right away by page four of the first issue when your jaw will drop. And on the final page, you might even shed a few tears!"

Predator Kills The Marvel Universe is out on 13 August.

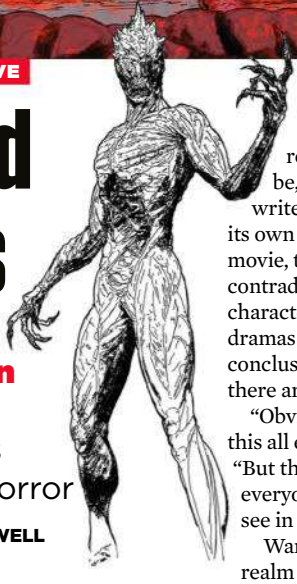
The formerly unidentified demon has been named.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Altered States

IDW's new **Event Horizon** prequel is as much inner as outer space horror

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



LIKE *ALIEN*, PAUL WS Anderson's 1997 film *Event Horizon* can be described as space horror, as it centres on the crew of a rescue vessel, attempting to recover the titular missing starship from a hellish dimension. But according to Christian Ward, writer of new prequel series *Dark Descent*, the five-parter is more cosmic horror.

"No monster stalks the corridors in this film, instead it's something outside of your understanding," Ward tells Red Alert. "That's more important than the gore. The real fear was about the unknown. That these characters were dwarfed by the scale of the terror happening around them. For me, cosmic horror gives me endless possibilities since its horror should always feel at the edge or beyond our understanding."

While we're aware of the fate of those on board the Event Horizon, Ward was free to chart how they came to fall into a black hole. "We only had their distress signal, and outside of Captain Kilpack – who rightly plays a significant role – there were only hints about the other characters," he says.

Ward took inspiration from another sci-fi prequel. "Watching *Andor* really unlocked what this comic could be," he continues. "My ambition was to write a story that could not only stand on its own but would change the context of the movie, that would add to it rather than contradict it. Having a wholly new set of characters, you're able to explore their own dramas even as the story hurtles towards its conclusion. Despite this being a prequel, there are plenty of shocks in store."

"Obviously, folks have some idea where this all ends up," adds artist Tristan Jones. "But that doesn't necessarily mean everyone ends up in the bloody orgy we see in the film."

Ward has also developed the lore of the realm where the demonic entity resides. "The chaos realm always felt like it was very ancient, like it predated humankind, and the film itself is stuffed with religious and often medieval imagery so it made sense to explore a medieval interpretation of Hell and demons," he explains. "I looked at Dante's *Inferno*, the nine circles of Hell, the *Divine Comedy*, and old demonology. Paimon, due to what he's known for, was perfect to fold into our story.

"I even did the initial design when I put together the initial pitch, and the eagle-eyed among you might notice something very *Event Horizon*-specific about how he looks. Saying anything more would give away too much – but I will say that he's not the only demon we're going to see. *Event Horizon* has often been referred to as '*Hellraiser* in space'. As a huge Clive Barker fan I'm leaning into that, and Paimon is our Pinhead!"

"Christian's script left things very open for me to go nuts," adds Jones. "I'm hoping you'll be hard pressed not to go 'Holy shit!', as I've gone for something very visceral."

Event Horizon: Dark Descent is out on 20 August.

SCI-FACT! ***Event Horizon*** **is part of IDW's horror-oriented Dark imprint, which will also include** ***Smile*****,** ***A Quiet Place*** **and** ***Sleepy Hollow*****.**

Art the Clown's funhouse promises to drench you.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Slash Symbol

Art the Clown and Jason Voorhees stalk Halloween Horror Nights

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

SPOOKY SEASON IS JUST DAYS away for the world's number one Halloween event, when Universal Studios' *Halloween Horror Nights* opens those gothic gates for its 34th year.

This year's Orlando lineup includes 10 haunted houses, four scare zones, two street entertainment areas, two live shows, a horror nightclub themed around a witches coven at Universal Citywalk and Halloween offerings at all resort hotels. Deep breath – there's *also* a tribute store that's bigger than ever before, a new series of podcasts, Halloween-inspired food, daytime "lights on" house tours and that's still not all.

"A lot has changed this year – you're gonna feel it in the scare zones and all around the park. It's more immersive," Lora Sauls, one of the creative team at Universal, tells Red Alert about the afterhours event that transforms the theme park. "Our houses have upped their game in technology, but this year you're going to feel Halloween everywhere you go."

Sauls notes they'll be including additional street entertainment, including zombie carhops at a diner ("Two will be on roller skates!"); enhanced fog, scenic and lighting effects; roaming chainsaw hordes; and characters where people may not expect them. Oh, and a party zone called "Club Horror" with a DJ and dancers in full macabre makeup.

"We're really trying to ramp up what we have in the scare zones, we're really trying to impact the entire park."

In addition to five original houses – each worthy of its own movie – this year sees five recognisable franchises taking centre stage: *Fallout*, based on the videogame-inspired Prime Video series; the Blumhouse film of *Five Nights At Freddy's*; *WWE Presents: The Horrors Of The Wyatt Sicks*; *Terrifier*; and *Jason Universe*.

Based on the protagonist from the *Friday The 13th* movies, Saul says the latter is "One of the most intense Jason houses we've ever had". It's created by the team behind last year's nerve-wracking *Insidious* attraction, and promises to be even more relentless with "a gauntlet of Jasons" attacking guests as they visit key locations from the classic franchise. They'll even walk *through* the iconic mask. Sauls says she believes there's something from every film, as well as the "new" Jason that was recently revealed.

"*Five Nights At Freddy's*, we're very excited about working with the Jim Henson Creature Shop on *all* of our puppets and animatronics for every character in that. You're going to go into the pizzeria and see Freddy, Chica and Bonnie, all on that stage, which is *super* cool."

Fans are also going to be able to eat at Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria for real, with plans to transform an established restaurant for the duration of the event.

Fallout promises to contain similar touchpoints for fans. "You're going into the vaults – but we're going into it at that moment that the raiders are attacking during the wedding," Saul explains. "We're right in the middle of that attack." But if the guests think they're staying underground, the house is set to surprise them.

"We're following Lucy's story. We exit into the wasteland, and it is big scale. You see the buses stacked, and you're walking in and into [trading town] Filly. You see the Gulper, the T-60, radroaches. We're going to the Super Duper Mart. We're going everywhere. You're going to see everything you want to see out of that franchise."

There are five original houses as well as the franchise ones.

Red Alert

Guests will be able to go beyond *Fallout*'s vaults.

Come for the pizza, flee from the creepy animatronics.

Sauls notes this was all being created while the *Fallout* team were filming new episodes. "I can't say what it is, but we're teasing their second season at the end of our house..."

ART IS SUBJECTIVE

Terrifier is the result of "a really great collaboration" with creator and owner Damien Leone, with Sauls citing it as possibly the closest they've ever directly worked with a franchise creator.

The bravest of guests will step inside the Terrifier Funhouse from the second movie and be witness to a collection of Art the Clown's most grotesque kills.

"It could be the bloodiest house we've ever done in *HHN* history," Sauls grins. So much so, in fact, that they recommend wearing a poncho. "In the final scene, 'Art's Symphony Of Gore', you can choose the wet or dry path. Both are horrific in their own right, but if you go down that wet path, you will get wet, and it's not typical *HHN* wet, you will walk out of there *soaked*.

"It's his goriest kills with, sometimes, the *HHN* twist. We go there. You see *that* kill," she says, mimicking the infamous upside-down hacksaw moment from the first film. "You see him as what we call 'Lady Art'. You go into the bathroom. There are all kinds of smells. The mashed potato kill? We're not doing it with mashed potatoes. We're doing it in the bathroom.

"It's pretty gory. It might be the goriest house we've ever done. It stinks. And that stink permeates the whole sound stage."

Don't say you weren't warned.

"I like that you go through a tunnel of bleach where you have water effects thrown on you with the smell of bleach in the air," Sauls adds, unprompted.

"We're also going to have Art the Clown stalking you everywhere you go into the park," Sauls grins, noting that variations of the killer clown could appear in queues, stores, restaurants and "dark, dark alleys that no one wants to go down".

If guests survive, there's an impending 35th anniversary in 2026. "We started in April," Sauls reveals. "All five original content houses have already been approved. We're working on [design] sketchup now..."

There truly is no rest for the wicked.

Halloween Horror Nights runs from 28 August in Orlando and 4 September in Hollywood, until 2 November. Visit halloweenhorrornights.com or virginholidays.co.uk.

SCI-FACT! **A permanent haunted house experience – *Universal Horror Unleashed* – opens in Las Vegas this month.**

SCI-FACT! ***Archie*** **has also previously crossed over with** ***Red Sonja***, ***Vampirella***, ***Batman '66***, ***Harley Quinn***, ***Poison Ivy***, ***Hellboy*** **and** ***Sharknado*****.**

Archie is probably right to look nervous.

The crossover you didn't realise you wanted.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Redport Convention

Move over Marvel/DC – **Archie vs Minor Threats** is the crossover of the year!

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

HAVING BATTLED BOTH Punisher and Predator, Archie has previously crossed paths with some unusual and formidable opponents. Now the Riverdale resident and his friends face their toughest test yet as they journey to Redport, Twilight City's seedy underbelly, where they encounter Frankie Follis, aka Playtime, from *Minor Threats*, Patton Oswalt and Jordan Blum's series about small-time super-criminals.

"It's not just a fish-out-of-water story; it's a complete tone-out-of-water story," says Blum. "The total clash of voices and styles propels the series forward, but the main characters are united by a parallel story – their core selves are challenged as Archie doubts himself, debating whether to break bad, while Frankie questions the motivation of her leadership as the queenpin of crime. Being around a bunch of teens forces her to confront her own tragic childhood, and what starts as a ludicrous crossover becomes an essential chapter for our characters."

"The worlds of Riverdale and Twilight City don't gel at all, and that's the fun of it," continues Oswalt. "It was a blast seeing how Archie's clean-lined, brightly lit world collides and contrasts with Playtime's low-stakes crime noir milieu."

According to Timmy Heague, who is co-scripting with Oswalt and Blum, the four-parter is very much a collision between the two very different casts. "The core Riverdale gang of Archie, Jughead, Betty and Veronica are accompanied by other notable faces such as Reggie Mantle, Moose, Josie and the Pussycats and Sabrina the Teenage Witch, as there's a big mystical element to our story," he explains. "On the dark and grittier Twilight City side of things, there's Frankie's literal partner-in-crime and lover, Scalpel, who is joined by fan-favourite Barfly, as well as members of superhero support group The Alternates like Crab Louie and Mary The Multi-Monster. Like Riverdale, Twilight City has become a world with so many bizarre, flawed and hilarious characters to pull from, so even characters like

Sure looks like a pretty packed diner...

[*Minor Threats*'] Major Mummy and [*Archie*'s] Dilton Doiley get their moment."

"I want to draw literally everyone!" laughs artist Scott Koblish. "So I asked for as many folks to be in there as possible, especially Josie and the Pussycats, as that movie altered how I saw reality when I was younger. I'm going over both universes with a fine-tooth comb, drawing all of the oddballs and weirdos."

Koblish also adjusts his artistic approach as the story progresses. "We start out in the Archie-verse, so I wanted to establish that standard art style everyone is familiar from the Archie books as our starting point, and then things get really dark and dire and fucked up as we enter the world of *Minor Threats*, as there's lots of cross-pollination," he continues. "Once we start mixing the universes together and the Riverdale kids get stranded in Redport, that's where the magic really happens. Each set of characters has their own set visual language, and it's been so much fun juxtaposing the two groups, such as when I set up a specific look to Sabrina's magic versus the main villain's magic, so when they fight you'll automatically know who's doing what."

Archie vs Minor Threats is out now.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Personality Crisis

Red Sonja is Reborn in Christopher Priest's radical new barbarian series WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

CENTRING ON YOUNG BRITISH diplomatic clerk Maggie Sutherland, who is mysteriously transported from 2025 to the Hyboria Age before turning into Red Sonja herself, *Sonja Reborn* could easily have been titled *Becoming Red Sonja*. Illustrated by Alessandro Miracolo, it represents writer Christopher Priest's return to the She-Devil with a Sword after initially scripting her during his mid-'80s run on Marvel's *Conan The Barbarian*.

"It's not so much an origin story as it's a derivation of *Alice In Wonderland* or *The Wizard Of Oz*. Is this person hallucinating, imagining herself transported to Hyboria, or is this Red Sonja hallucinating about the modern world? The answer to both is yes!," says Priest, who also writes *Vampirella* for publishers Dynamite Entertainment.

"While differing in execution, the basic idea is inspired by Robert E Howard's 1932 short story for the pulp magazine *Strange Tales*," he continues, referring to Conan's prose debut, and comparing *Sonja Reborn* to *Star Trek*'s alternate Kelvin universe. "It's maybe more like 'New 52 Red Sonja'. I like to think of it as more like the spaghetti thing from *The Flash* [where Bruce Wayne explains the multiverse using pasta]. This is definitely Red Sonja, while not connected to nor denying previous continuity. *Sonja Reborn* is its own thing, a non-volatile reconstruction hopefully unencumbered by larger concerns while doing no lasting harm to the existing legend."

While Maggie appears to travel back through the centuries, there's no actual time travel involved. "There's simply there and here and the question of which reality is real," says Priest, declining to reveal exactly how Maggie comes to embody Red Sonja. "That's what the series is about so I don't want to spoil it here."

There's also a reason why Maggie hails from the UK. "I made her British so Red Sonja's speech pattern would be mildly consistent with how the character has been previously depicted," explains Priest. "I wouldn't want her wandering around with a New York accent, wisecracking like Deadpool, although that might be fun!"

First created by Roy Thomas and Barry Windsor-Smith in 1973's *Conan The Barbarian* issue 23, Red Sonja has often been mistreated by the writers and artists who have depicted her since then. "The casualness with which she has been presented as this half-dressed, swashbuckling – read: murdering – woman fearlessly charging around Hyboria and having adventures always seemed like a male fantasy, which rarely celebrated feminism in any meaningful way.

"With *Vampirella*, I've tried hard to respectfully imbue her with agency and dimension, and with Red Sonja my first question was how might I bring those qualities to that character and what might I have to say about her some three decades after I last, rather ignobly, handled her?

"The swashbucklerette stereotype feels dated and sexist in today's environment when compared to portrayals of more realistic, thoughtful and complex political and environmental challenges endured by characters like Daenerys Targaryen. I'm guilty myself of using women – including Sonja – like pawns in my early Marvel work, because that's what comics were in the '80s. *Sonja Reborn* therefore has elements of my own journey to be a better writer and a better person."

Sonja Reborn is out on 6 August.

The cover art for *Sonja Reborn* #1.

SCI-FACT! Formerly known as Jim Owsley, Christopher Priest is also scripting Black Panther in *Marvel Knights: The World To Come*.

SCI-FACT! **Steve Yeowell modelled the look of Red Dragon's alter ego Siadwel Rhys on Welsh poet Dylan Thomas.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Design For Life

Zenith superhero **Red Dragon** returns for his first solo *2000 AD* series

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

A RARE FORAY INTO SUPERHEROES for the Galaxy's Greatest Comic, Zenith has only sporadically appeared in *2000 AD* over the past few decades. The strip's main man is nowhere in sight, but Welsh superhero Red Dragon (who debuted in 1987's prog #535) is now spinning off into his own series by writer Rob Williams and artists Patrick Goddard and Steve Yeowell, who co-created Zenith with Grant Morrison. Despite quickly dying at the hands of Nazi super-soldier Masterman, the pyrokinetic hero made a particularly big impression on readers from South Wales like the young Williams.

"Here was this Welsh superhero who talked like people from the Valleys, where I grew up, and was clearly the cavalry, and then he had this cruel, pathos-filled ending, which hit you right in the gut," he recalls. "This isn't some lame 'back from the dead/new adventures' approach. It's a story that's entirely rooted in Red Dragon's character and about being Welsh, and how Britain has changed between the optimism of the '60s and Red Dragon's heyday and where we are now as a country."

"I have really strong memories of drawing that short and tragic battle between Siadwel Rhys [Red Dragon's real name] and Mastermind in Phase I," adds Yeowell. "We'd spent several episodes getting to know him by then, so Grant's script at that point in the story felt incredibly powerful."

The story alternates between two timelines. Goddard illustrates the black-and-white present-day scenes featuring journalist Martin Howe – who briefly appeared in Phase I – while Yeowell tackles the '60s-set flashbacks, to full psychedelic effect. "Martin Howe wrote a book about the '60s super team Cloud 9 called *Flying High* and when we meet him here he's written a second book to try and cash in on the wave of '60s nostalgia," explains Williams. "A production company are making a Netflix documentary about Martin's book so he and the filmmakers head off to Llangenech, Siadwel's home town, to interview people who knew him and they uncover more than they expected there, hidden in the Valleys. That part of the world, once you get away from the M4, you head into farming territory and you can feel you're a good distance away from 21st-century Britain – as there's a different language, for one. But I liked the feeling – much like *True Detective* – that if trouble happened here, help is a long way away."

Drawing on Morrison's old stories, we can expect to see some other familiar faces in the '60s scenes. "There are a few sequences here and there in *Zenith* where we saw hints of what happened to cause a schism between Red Dragon and Cloud 9," teases Williams. "We put a little bit of fat on the bones of Siadwel's character whilst hopefully always staying true to who he was when Grant and Steve invented him."

"There's a BBC reporter appearing for a few panels in episode one who might look familiar," adds Yeowell. "As per Rob's suggestion in the script, I based him on a well-known journalist of the time..."

Red Dragon begins in 2000 AD prog #2451 out on 24 September.

There's a live-action version of '90s animated series **Captain Planet** in development at Netflix, produced by king of the Arrowverse **Greg Berlanti**. *Mrs Davis* co-creator **Tara Hernandez** is writing.

NEWSWARP

Breaking Genre News!

The cracked minds behind *What We Do In The Shadows* are developing new TV comedy **Very Young Frankenstein**, inspired by Mel Brooks's 1974 classic *Young Frankenstein*.

Prepare to be judged, creeps! *Thor: Ragnarok*'s **Taika Waititi** is set to direct a new big-screen take on *2000 AD* icon **Judge Dredd**. *The Fall Guy*'s **Drew Pearce** is writing the screenplay, rumoured to lean into the strip's darkly satirical side.

Chucky's **Callum Vinson** is ultimate problem child Jason Voorhees in *Friday The 13th* prequel series **Crystal Lake**.

Robert Eggers's *Werwulf* is proving to be quite the *Nosferatu* reunion. **Willem Dafoe**, **Lily-Rose Depp** and **Aaron Taylor-Johnson** are all signed for the hairy-minded medieval horror.

Murderbot has been renewed for a second season at Apple TV+.

Fire up the Animus! Netflix is moving ahead with a live-action TV version of **Assassin's Creed**, with *Westworld*'s **Roberto Patino** and *Halo*'s **David Wiener** as showrunners. The series is set to span "pivotal historical events".

Blue skies for once in Gotham City with the news that **Matt Reeves** has finally delivered the script for **The Batman Part II**. The tardy sequel is targeting a 1 October 2027 release.

The **Night At The Museum** franchise is set for a serious reboot with **Shawn Levy** producing.

Royce Johnson returns to the MCU as Brett Mahoney in season two of **Daredevil: Born Again**.

Late Night With The Devil's **David Dastmalchian** will play M Bison, supremo of criminal organisation Shadaloo, in the new **Street Fighter** movie. Indian action star **Vidyut Jammwal** is superpowered yogi Dhalsim.

Maisie Williams and **Lee Pace** are joining **Sandra Bullock** and **Nicole Kidman** in the sequel to 1998's **Practical Magic**.

Netflix Korea is producing a live-action TV adaptation of web novel, anime series, videogame and all-round all-conquering multi-media phenomenon **Solo Leveling**. It's set to be directed by **Lee Hae-jun** and **Kim Byung-seo**, with **Byeon Woo-seok** cast in the lead role of Sung Jin-woo.

Welcome back, Frank... Production is underway in New York City on **Jon Bernthal**'s **The Punisher** special. Bernthal co-writes with *We Own This City*'s **Reinaldo Marcus Green**.

It's official – **Invincible** has been renewed for a fifth season. Season four is set to debut in 2026, with **Matthew Rhys** joining the voice cast. Comic book baddie Thragg, Grand Regent of the Viltrumite Empire, will finally make it to the screen.

Doug Liman is to direct a new big-screen version of Stephen King's **The Stand**.

Back To Black's **Marisa Abela** (right) joins **Henry Cavill** and **Russell Crowe** in the *Highlander* reboot.

Eternals writers **Kaz** and **Ryan Firpo** will adapt Michael Crichton and James Patterson's novel **Eruption**, about a volcanic eruption threatening an Hawaiian military base that hides a potentially apocalyptic secret...

Benjamin Evan Ainsworth will play Link while **Bo Bragason** is Zelda in the live-action **The Legend Of Zelda** movie.

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SCI-FACT! ***The Death Of Fifi*, written by Seventh Doctor script editor Andrew Cartmel, is available as a bonus item, including as a children's book.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Killing Jokers

Laugh no more in Cutaway Comics' *Doctor Who* sequel **The Happiness Patrol**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

CUTAWAY IS FOLLOWING ITS "The Happiness Patrol" prequel *The Death Of Fifi* (originally serialised in *SFX*) with a new sequel, *Unhappily Ever After*. Written by Steve Lyons and illustrated by Adrian Salmon, the 48-pager takes place in the immediate aftermath of the 1988 story in which the Seventh Doctor starts a rebellion on Terra Alpha, an Earth colony whose despotic leader, Helen A, has outlawed sadness.

"Rather than trying to fit my story around what had already been done, I decided it was best to head into the future," Lyons tells Red Alert. "I did borrow a couple of elements from *The Death Of Fifi*, though, so it's still very much a part of our continuity."

The earlier tale preceded the advent of the Doctor. His departure leaves questions. "The Doctor's absence, far from a negative, is pretty much the point of our story," says Lyons. "He arrived on Terra Alpha, took down the government and disappeared again, but what happens next? Who gets to fill the void left by Helen A, and will they be any better?"

Citing "The Happiness Patrol" as "one of my favourite *Doctor Who* stories", Lyons not only rewatched the TV episodes, but also reread original scriptwriter Graeme Curry's Target

Adrian Salmon's bold and bright artwork.

novelisation. "Without going into spoilers, anyone who knows the story behind the story will recognise a certain figure looming large in Ade's promotional artwork," he teases.

Salmon wasn't initially confident about remaining true to Curry's original humanoid description of psychopathic android the Kandy Man. "I wasn't sure if it would utilise the comic strip format to its full potential, but after numerous sketches I managed to design a Kandy Man that's true to Graeme's script and would look creepy in our comic," he says. "Most of the other characters are based on their TV look – albeit a later look of them, following Steve's descriptions."

With Lyons saying that "they drive the story", we'll see many surviving characters

> **"I managed to design a Kandy Man that's true to Graeme's script"**

from "The Happiness Patrol". "I let them shape the future for me. I started out by looking at who was available to me and what do they want now and what might they do about it?" he explains. "At the heart are Susan Q and Earl Sigma, trying to hold everything together. Helen A also makes an appearance, as do the Pipe People. But my favourites to write were Happiness Patrol members Daisy K and Priscilla P, both on the losing side of the revolution but still as arch as ever."

"The Happiness Patrol"'s satirical elements still resonate today, Lyons believes. "There's been a lot of talk about politics, and Helen A being based on Maggie Thatcher, but its themes are really universal – a repressive government brooks no dissenting voices. It's exactly as relevant now as it was then. With Helen A deposed and her Happiness Patrols disbanded, 'The Happiness Patrol' wasn't such a relevant title for us now. Hence the subtitle Unhappily Ever After."

The Happiness Patrol: Unhappily Ever After is available for late pledges on Kickstarter.

It's hammer time! Pasqual Ferry's issue one art.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Get Lukki

Journey into mystery as the **Mortal Thor** falls to Earth

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER PROVING THAT EVEN a god can die in *Immortal Thor* issue 25, the Odinson is reborn as construction worker Sigurd Jarlson in his new series, which is the second act in a larger three-part story.

"This is a separate book, deserving of a new issue one," says writer Al Ewing, who is partnered with artist Pasqual Ferry. "But it's also a continuation of what went before – in the same way we don't begrudge *The Two Towers* for not still being *The Fellowship Of The Ring*."

However, *Mortal Thor* isn't a return to the essential qualities of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's original '60s run, despite Thor recently encountering his erstwhile human host Donald Blake. "That implies that Sigurd will bang his hammer on the ground at some point and become Thor in all his power and glory," says Ewing. "That's not how this works. Thor is dead and forgotten. Sigurd is a mortal man with absolutely no superhuman powers. He's less powerful than Daredevil. There's potentially something quite Kirby-esque about the idea of an ordinary man rising to take on the challenges of the gods, but that's not really been a Thor story until now."

While the series is set mostly in New York, Asgard has been cut off from Midgard and the Nine Realms. "There's not much more we can learn at this point – apart from where the body went, which might become relevant if the link between realms is somehow reforged," teases Ewing, hinting that we will find out more about teenage thief Lukki.

"We'll learn more about Sigurd at the same rate he does – as he's dealing with a significant amount of memory loss, and we saw how he met Lukki in *Immortal Thor* issue 25, so that relationship has just begun," he continues. "In *Mortal Thor* issue one we'll see how he gets on with his next-door neighbour, and over time we'll see his ties to other people in the local community. He's a pretty charming guy when he's not swinging that hammer, which is mostly down to how Pasqual draws him. I was worried people might not fall in love with Sigurd the way they love Thor, but when they see him making breakfast, laughing and joking with friends, they'll fall head over heels. And then the action starts!"

Having explored the nature of the story in *Immortal Thor*, Ewing reprises those themes in *Mortal Thor* with the Norse gods having reverted to legend. "The big question I'm asking is, 'Who is Thor without everything we think makes him Thor?'" he explains. "So many people treat Thor as an amalgamation of powers, so what if we take all his powers away? What if we take his history, his myth and even his identity away? Then once he has nothing left, we put him in a situation where he has to be a hero again – in that situation, is there enough Thor left to rise to the challenge and get it all back? Because clearly if the answer to the last question is 'No', then Thor was never a hero at all."

Mortal Thor is out on 27 August.

SCI-FACT! **Thor first assumed his Sigurd Jarlson persona in 1983's issue 341, after giving up his Donald Blake identity.**

SCI-FACT! **Having starred in the play's Broadway run, Sadie Sink (Max) is set to executive-produce *John Proctor Is The Villain* for Universal.**

COUNTDOWN TO STRANGER THINGS 5

Netflix released a new trailer for season five on 16 July – it reached 17 million YouTube views in a week.

On the day the trailer was released, Ross Duffer took to Instagram to share the original Photoshopped poster that he and Matt used to pitch to Netflix in 2015, when the show was still called *Montauk*.

Ross also shared the original sizzle reel that he and Matt made to sell the show – revealing that it was how they ultimately discovered the composers for the series.

The co-creator also used Instagram to debunk fake running times for season five episodes that had been widely shared on social media.

The Broadway production of *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* has released a brand new show trailer.

Farshore will release *The Official Stranger Things Annual 2026* in September. It will feature key moments from seasons one to four – no spoilers!

Stranger Things will have a haunted house experience at Halloween Horror Nights Singapore this year. The new experience is inspired by seasons two to four and runs from 26 September to 1 November.

A range of 3D head topper spinning pens has been released by Monogram. The collection features the original core five and a Demogorgon.

Eggo has once again teamed up with the show to release limited edition themed waffles. This time they're strawberry-flavoured and, of course, come in retro packaging.

Cookies United is releasing a Creel House Chocolate Cookie Scene set and a Mini Upside Down House kit. Both come with character cut-outs on the packaging.

Staying with cookies, Chips Ahoy launched a limited edition range on 11 August. It includes nostalgic '80s and glow-in-the-dark packaging, while the chocolate cookie features a strawberry red filling inspired by the Upside Down. There's also an augmented reality game and a competition (main prize: an Eddie Munson guitar). Visit chipsahoyscan.com.

Palermo has released a new range of *Stranger Things*/Surfer Boy Pizza, including Hawkins Lab Combination, Palace Arcade Pepperoni, Starcourt Mall Supreme and Hawkins High Cheese. Each one comes with limited edition stickers. A second wave of collectible stickers is imminent.

Wizards Of The Coast is releasing a new *Dungeons & Dragons* game called *Stranger Things: Welcome To The Hellfire Club*. The game, released on 7 October, is presented as the final campaign of Eddie Munson. It's available to pre-order now.

A junior novelisation of season one, featuring a section of colour photographs, has just been released in paperback. The junior novelisation of season two is released on 9 September.

Other official books coming soon include *The Official Activity Book* on 2 September, *The Dustin Experiment* on 29 October, plus *The Complete Colouring Book (Colour All Five Seasons!)* and *The Official-Colour-With-Stickers Book* on 30 September.

Covers for *The Complete Scripts* have been released – the first two volumes are available on 2 September, with the second two released on 9 December.

A limited edition 6" Demogorgon action figure was available from Jazwares at San Diego Comic-Con. Only 1,000 were released.

Lego will continue its *Stranger Things* BrickHeadz line with new figures of Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Will. The four-pack set is due for release in October.

Sandbox VR will launch an immersive virtual reality location-based experience later this year. *Stranger Things: Catalyst* will allow players to visit locations in Hawkins and battle creatures from the Upside Down.

Stranger Things is on Netflix.

SCI-FACT! **Victor Pemberton, who had a non-speaking role in "The Moonbase", later became *Doctor Who*'s script editor.**

NEW AUTHOR

JORDAN PROSSER

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND AUSTRALIA-SET DYSTOPIA *BIG TIME*

CAROLINE BAPTISTA

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Julian Ferryman is bass player for the Acceptables, a Melbourne pop-rock group who hit it big with their first album. Now he's been relegated to the sidelines with no creative control over album two, which is shaping up to be highly provocative. Julian wishes they could keep making the same old music.

A drug plays a big part. Tell us more.
→ F is a synthetic hallucinogen, applied with an eyedropper. Shortly after administering it, you "skip ahead", getting a glimpse of the future. How far depends on how much you take.

Did the book have a particular spark?
→ At first it was just the idea of this drug. Then, living through the 2010s, it felt like the world was getting suddenly smaller, even beginning to go backwards. So it became about that tension: a drug that lets you see forward even while the world around you is regressing.

How long did it take to write?
→ I started the first few chapters in 2014, then it sat gathering dust until the Covid lockdowns. It became more political and philosophical – a reflection of the world in which I was writing.

Got any advice for would-be writers?
→ Frederik Pohl said essentially: "Don't imagine the automobile, imagine the traffic jam." Don't get hung up on describing shiny new tech; look beyond the newness to a point where it's been fully integrated into society. What does the world look like then?

Big Time is out on 4 September, published by Dead Ink Books.

ISLE OF BRICK

We, my friends, have dragons. Only this time they're in Lego form. *How To Train Your Dragon* has conquered practically every other medium, so it was only a matter of time before Toothless was available in 784 pieces for your pleasure. He even comes with a Lego fish and some, er, Lego spit.

BLU MOVIES

You wait ages for a special edition BBC Blu-ray box set and then three come along at once! Available now to pre-order from the retailer of your choice are *Doctor Who: The Collection – Season 13*, *Blake's 7: The Collection – Series Two* and *Red Dwarf: Complete Series I-XIII*. The latter is a 32-disc set, including *Back To Earth* and *The Promised Land*. Cripes!

VINYL TERROR

No, we don't mean the Cybermen's jumpsuits. *Doctor Who*'s 1967 story "The Moonbase" comes to double "blue moon" vinyl, with linking narration and vintage-style TV listings, from 19 September.

SCI-FACT! As a teenager, Jim Shooter practiced writing his autograph with a Superman symbol for the S.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

JIM SHOOTER 1951-2025

The man behind Marvel's '80s

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

MATT CARASELLA/PATRICK MCMULLAN VIA GETTY

"MY PLAN IS TO MAKE this place bigger than Disney," an ambitious Jim Shooter told *The Comic Times* in 1980. And as editor-in-chief he steered one of the most creatively vibrant and financially successful eras in Marvel's history – while remaining a wildly divisive figure in the comics industry.

"Trouble" Shooter had his own origin story. Recuperating in Pittsburgh's Mercy Hospital at the age of 12, he discovered a communal stash of comic books. "The DC comics were pristine and the Marvel comics were ratty and dog-eared," he remembered. Impressed by Marvel's clearly more popular, character-driven storytelling, he imagined arch-rival DC would welcome scripts in the same style. At 14 he sold a *Legion Of Super-Heroes* story – his mother accompanied him to his first meeting at the DC offices – and went on to create Superman villain Parasite and such new Legionnaires as Karate Kid and Princess Projectra.

In 1975 Shooter joined Marvel as assistant editor, rising to editor-in-chief in 1978. "Boy, it was a mess there, but I got the trains running on time," he recalled. He managed a period of growth that helped pull the company out of a near-fatal monetary tailspin, building the lucrative direct sales market, launching the Epic imprint for creator-owned characters, and overseeing such classic runs as Frank Miller's *Daredevil* and Chris Claremont and John Byrne's *The Uncanny X-Men*. As well as *The Avengers*, Shooter also wrote 1984's popular *Secret Wars* crossover and its 1985 sequel. 1986's New Universe initiative was a rare flop.

In spite of such success many Marvel veterans bristled at Shooter's management style and creative vision. Deposed in March 1987, he set up Valiant Comics in 1989 then founded Defiant Comics and Broadway Comics in the '90s, before returning to DC in 2007 to write *The Legion Of Super-Heroes* once more.

LARRY ELLIS/EXPRESS/GETTY

GERALD HARPER 1929-2025

Specialising in the suavest of gents, Hertfordshire-born actor Gerald Harper originally intended to be a doctor but abandoned a medical course at Cambridge to audition for RADA. He mixed stage work with a screen career, beginning with an uncredited role in 1955's *The Dam Busters* before appearances in such classic British comedies as *The Admirable Crichton* (1957) and *The League Of Gentlemen* (1960).

Harper's eternal air of a man out of time made him perfect casting for the whimsical, swashbuckling BBC drama *Adam Adamant Lives!*, in which he brandished a swordstick as Adam Llewellyn De Vere Adamant, an Edwardian adventurer resurrected in the Swinging '60s. Developed by *Doctor Who*'s Sydney Newman, the show ran for two seasons between 1966 and 1967. Sadly many episodes are now lost.

Harper went on to play a heroic country squire in Yorkshire Television's *Hadleigh* and also found success as a radio presenter.

MARK SNOW 1946-2025

Born Martin Fulterman in Brooklyn, New York City, composer Mark Snow created the ethereal theme to *The X-Files* by pure serendipity: accidentally placing his hand on a keyboard while programming an echo effect, he found himself captivated by the uncanny sound that resulted. Paranoia you could whistle, the theme would become a top 10 hit in the UK, Ireland and across Europe in 1996.

After studying at New York's High School of Music and Art and the Juilliard School of Music – rooming with fellow future screen composer Michael Kamen – Snow went on to score such TV classics as *Starsky And Hutch*, *Hart To Hart* and *TJ Hooker*.

In addition to Chris Carter productions *Millennium*, *Harsh Realm* and *The Lone Gunmen*, Snow's genre credits include the first six seasons of *Smallville*, *The Ghost Whisperer*, *The New Mutants* and Mulder and Scully's two big screen outings.

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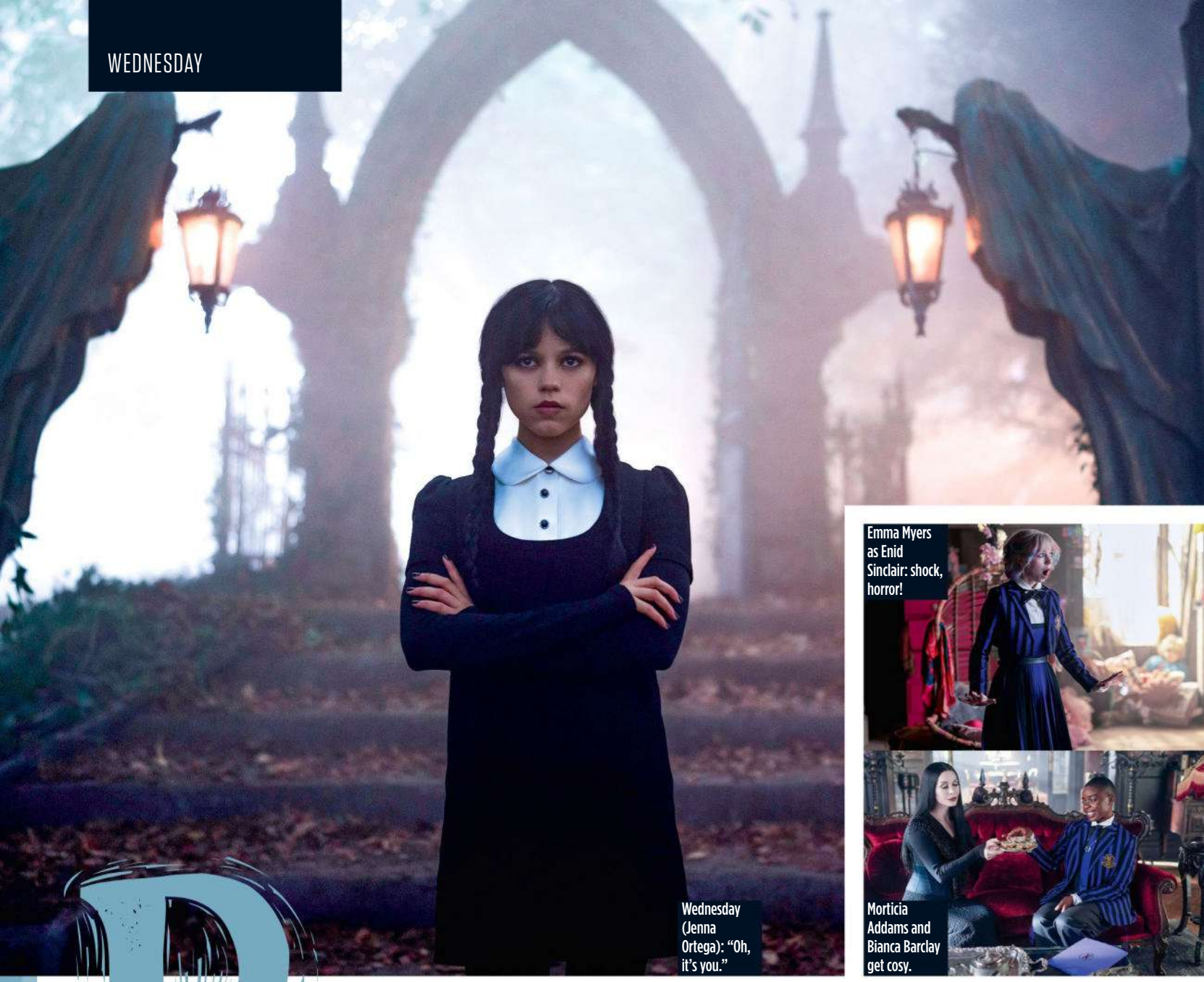
SFX ASKS THE BIG QUESTIONS OF **WEDNESDAY** SEASON TWO: HOW DO YOU FOLLOW UP A VIRAL DANCE SENSATION? AND HOW EXACTLY DO YOU STAY ON THIS MORTAL COIL?

WORDS: **CLARISSE LOUGHREY**

DANSE MACABRE



Wednesday (Jenna Ortega): "Oh, it's you."

Emma Myers as Enid Sinclair: shock, horror!

Morticia Addams and Bianca Barclay get cosy.

REQUIESCAT IN PACE, WEDNESDAY ADDAMS? Part one of Netflix's return to the gothic wonderland that is Nevermore Academy ended in quite the shock. Our heroine – Jenna Ortega's pigtailed, casually homicidal teen – was left sprawled out on the cobblestones in front of Willow Hill Psychiatric Hospital. "I've always dreamed of looking death in the face," she reflected. "But, in my final moments, all I hear is my mother's words ringing in my ears. Maybe I have made everything worse. Much worse."

When showrunners Alfred Gough and Miles Millar first began work on season two of *Wednesday*, Netflix had yet to confirm whether it would be split into two parts, à la *Stranger Things* and *Bridgerton*. "So we hedged our bets and crafted a deliberate high-stakes cliffhanger at the end of episode four," the showrunners tell *SFX*. "Tyler has escaped from Willow Hill, and Wednesday may be dead."

So say your prayers for Ms Addams, but there's plenty ahead too for her once-suitor, now potential vanquisher Tyler Galpin (Hunter Doohan). Back in season one, he was revealed to be a Hyde of the Robert Louis Stevenson variety: a vicious creature embodying a person's darkest, most animal nature, manipulated by Marilyn Thornhill (Christina Ricci) to help bring about the downfall of all outcasts, including Wednesday and her schoolmates at Nevermore.

But Marilyn's dead – and that now means we have a Hyde on the loose without its master, which the showrunners tease will lead us to some "raw, gut-wrenching moments" and a "phenomenal" turn from Doohan. "Despite Tyler's body count," they add, "there's something surprisingly empathetic and even likeable about him, and Hunter captures that duality perfectly."

As Doohan explains, "He believes he'll be in full control and he can do whatever he wants. But we learned from Christina Ricci's character in episode four that a Hyde basically can't survive without a master, so there's a lot he's

Pugsley (Isaac Ordonez, centre) joins Nevermore.

Wednesday is not impressed. By anything. Ever.

Showrunners Alfred Gough and Miles Millar.

She can't really be dead, can she? Oh yes.

going to learn in the next episode. Tyler's not under someone else's control, but he's also not in complete control of himself."

Death is the ultimate obstacle. But the stakes have been steadily rising for Wednesday ever since she marched (funereally, of course) onto the small screen three years ago. When cartoonist Charles Addams first began to sketch his little clan of kooks in 1938 for *The New Yorker* magazine, none of them had names or much of an individual identity beyond what could serve his grand punchline.

That was the idea of how funny it would be if all of Shelley, Stoker and Poe's creations were forced to contend with the dreary monotony of suburbia: hairdressers, babysitters, school buses, and Christmas carollers alike.

They only began to fully take shape after television producer David Levy approached Addams with his idea to create a weekly sitcom out of *The Addams Family*, which would ultimately run for two seasons from 1964 to 1966. Here was where Wednesday was officially christened Wednesday, alongside Morticia, Gomez, Pugsley and the rest. Much of Wednesday's acerbic nature, however, comes from Barry Sonnenfeld's pair of films from the '90s, *The Addams Family* and *Addams Family Values*, where she was played by a young Christina Ricci.

> **"We went around and pitched it to every studio, every streamer, every network in town"**

When Gough and Millar sent their season one scripts to eventual executive producer and regular director Tim Burton, he told them, according to Gough, that for the first time, "it felt like [*Wednesday*] was in the real world. It didn't feel like a cartoon." Here was an opportunity for a fresh take on a pop culture icon created with the involvement of the arch-mage of modern gothic himself – and yet, the series wasn't the easy sell you'd expect.

"We went around and pitched it to every studio, every streamer, every network in town," says Millar. "And only one place bought it and that was Netflix." Gough adds, "They were our first-choice college, but it was not a no-brainer." →

Siren-nara

Joy Sunday on Bianca Barclay's tricky conundrum in season two

There's such an interesting tension this season, because Bianca made the choice to cut ties with the MorningSong cult and yet she still feels this connection and responsibility for her mother.
I actually am quite fascinated with cult documentaries. Part of the dynamic that's always been interesting to me is how rooted in these very insulated communities many of these folks can be, especially given that her mom and she have always had to fend for themselves. There's a part of Bianca that's very sympathetic to what her mom has fallen into, while being mad at her for not making a very good choice. It's not like Bianca is without fault – she's essentially leading a double life as a student while also being on the run. So it's complicated.

How much is she still in the process of deprogramming herself from this cult?
I think Bianca never bought it in the first place. This is her power, so she knows what it's like to say something and somebody follows it because she can do that any day. So it's really easy to spot that from far away.

The "siren song" is such an interesting power, because there's a real ethical element to it: in what situations can you justify manipulating someone's free will?
That's an interesting question, because that's her trajectory in the season. Her using it when it doesn't feel good. Her history with it is that very early on, she experienced what it was like to say something to someone that she didn't necessarily mean, but that's what she felt she wanted to happen in the moment, and it harmed them. So I think, from very early on, she learned what was right or wrong about her power and, because of that, is always striving to use it for good.

Burton and cast: one big (Addams) family.

TWISTED FAMILY

TIM BURTON ON CHANGE, SUCCESS AND THE TIMELESS APPEAL OF THE ADDAMS

What do you think keeps drawing people to the character of Wednesday Addams?
I'm surprised if it's a success or a failure. So either way I'm always surprised. But the thing that drew me to *Wednesday* was the character herself. Wednesday just really spoke to me. I share her worldview, I share her outlook on society, parents and school. When I read the initial script, it spoke to me. That made me really want to do this project. For me, the draw is a character who I really identify with. She is who she is, and that's why she's such a strange character. She's very much herself and a unique individual.

How has Wednesday changed in season two?
I've never done something where it's one year then the next. Wednesday's a funny character because she's very strong in who she is. Her level of growth is perhaps not immediately known to the visible eye. She is very specific, and she doesn't move much. The key element is keeping her true to herself while encountering new people, new situations. She's still going to school – not her favourite thing, which I could relate to. She's such a strong character that we try to find new nuances, but within a limited bandwidth. The show has always been about the characters at the heart of it and who Wednesday is. No matter what gets a little bit bigger this season, all those elements remain the same.

This season focuses a lot more on the Addams family.
One of the most interesting things about *Wednesday* is the Addams family mythology. We've grounded that element of the story so that we could identify real family issues that happen in real life. Past iterations can skew more cartoony, and we're bringing it back to real emotions, real feelings, real family issues. Obviously there's the classic mother-daughter issue between Wednesday and her mother, Morticia, but we added to that this season by introducing Morticia's mother and their dynamic. As we all know, at Christmas time when you bring the family together, that's when the nightmare begins.

Joanna Lumley as Grandmama. Slay, queen!

That was fun to play with, and having Joanna Lumley as Morticia's mother just made it extra-special. The dynamics between mothers and daughters over two generations were very interesting to explore. Kids always forget that their parents are actually human beings. What kids don't often realise is that people change and evolve. And this idea of the whole Addams family being drawn back to school at this point in their lives is interesting, and it causes friction.

This show is visually heightened, but at the heart of it are very real family dynamics. Each episode has a slightly different vibe to it, but ultimately, this season is about family – and not just the Addams. Family weaves quite heavily into this season.

Christopher Lloyd as Professor Orloff.

> **Expectations are so high for season two, and no one's are higher than our own**

"But that's interesting in terms of, now everyone wants their own *Wednesday* show," Millar continues. "I'll never forget listening to Mike White when he was getting his Emmy for *The White Lotus*, saying that, again, there was only one buyer for his show. Everybody else in that room had passed.

"Shows that connect usually are the shows that are unexpected and are not the ones that the norm will go for. That's what people are looking for. They don't want the same old, they want something a bit different."

Thankfully, "a bit different" is precisely Wednesday's personal brand, although it's left her with a new and unusual problem in season two: what happens when the self-proclaimed outsider saves the day and becomes the most popular girl in school?

Well, she hates every second of it. "The last thing Wednesday wants to do is be part of a club that wants her," says Gough. "She is always going to push against that. That's why she's Wednesday." As she tells the staff and students at the end of episode one, "Don't put me on a pedestal."

But whether she'll admit to it or not, Wednesday isn't quite the same hermit she once was. She's made a friend in Enid (Emma Myers), her werewolf roommate. This Wednesday has room to grow, and the time Gough, Millar and even Ortega have spent with her has only deepened their understanding of who this character is and who she could be.

"[Jenna] embodies that character so fully and always did," says Gough. "The first season, we're always trying to figure it out. But once everybody's settled in and you know the character and you know the world, then you can bring new shades to it."

"It's alive! It's alive!" But what is it, and...

...just exactly what's going on in part two?

There's a plan in place, of course, and several key goals they'd like to hit. But, Millar stresses, "They could always change. For us, we always take it a season at a time. It's always looking at it like, 'What is the season ahead of us?' and never taking anything for granted."

Television is the art of laying down tracks with a crowbar in your back pocket. If you can't adapt, you can't survive – that's a lesson Gough and Millar had no choice but to learn while working on their second television project as a duo: the pre-Superman, teenage Clark Kent series *Smallville*.

"We always felt we were playing for our lives on *Smallville*," says Millar. "The network was taken over by another network in the middle of our run. It made us more creatively adventurous with *Smallville* because The WB [the series' original home] vanished and we suddenly became The CW. So we were always under this existential threat.

"What's amazing about *Wednesday* is that its unexpected popularity and success has certainly given us a strong foundation to explore and go ahead creatively and do what we always planned to do. But we'll take it a season at a time and really see where the characters are going."

"All the focus is on *Wednesday*," Gough says. "But, even in our own heads, we know that there are places in this *Wednesday* world that we can expand – and we've had those discussions." Miller adds, "The thing for us is, second seasons are notorious. I give up on a lot of shows in the second season, within the first episode I give up. Expectations are so high for season two, and no one's expectations are higher than our own. We set the bar for ourselves really, really high and that's where our focus is."

"What's great about this season is we can go deeper with not only Wednesday and the Addams family, but the other characters," adds Gough. "And expand the aperture out."

THE TELL-TALE HEART

That extended aperture encompasses a homely little cottage nestled on the grounds of Nevermore Academy, a short walk away from Wednesday. It was easier for Wednesday to evade the attentions of Morticia (Catherine Zeta-Jones) when she was a crystal ball away. Now there's no escape.

"Just because a family loves each other doesn't mean they don't have conflict," Gough says. "In the old series and in the '90s movies, the Addams family... it's almost like a sitcom setup where they're all aligned, and the outside →

Hyde and Seek

Hunter Doohan on what lies in store for Tyler Galpin and his monstrous form

What's it like playing this riff on Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde – questioning if Tyler always had this monster inside, or whether he was merely turned into one?
I think it's more about this Hyde layer taking over his mind. He has a lot of his own rage inside of him, but all the most horrible stuff we've seen him do has been him being controlled by someone. There's a lot, in the second part of this season, of moments where we get to see Tyler's true emotions underneath, even if he's not in a position to express them fully.

Do you think there's still a little part of him that cares for Wednesday?
His dad had this abusive relationship with him, because his mom was a Hyde and he hates Tyler for it. So I don't think he's ever had anyone who's really loved him since his mom. He thinks maybe Wednesday could be that, but when she flat-out denies him in episode two, his feelings of betrayal and abandonment colour everything – and so now he's really out on a revenge mission. But even in episode four, he throws Wednesday out the window but doesn't quite finish the job. There are a lot of complicated layers to how he feels about Wednesday for sure.

It must have been nice to have those scenes with Christina Ricci and really explore a relationship that was primarily off-screen in season one.
It was always hinted that it was this really weird connection and I think you get to see that – the way she comes in and talks as if she's his mother, but it's kind of this sexual undertone. We touch and hug and then, for him, we established that because they had been separated for a while, her control over him was less intense. I wanted to make it feel like he needed to kill her, but it was still really hard for him.

Just as before, Thing is once again played by itself.

Nothing to see here, move along quietly please.

Evie Templeton (second left) as Agnes.

Enid and Wednesday discover social media.

world is their enemy or obstacle. That's just not a realistic portrayal of a family, even a family that loves each other."

It's not only Morticia who has had more to do this season: Gomez (Luis Guzmán), Lurch (George Burcea), Thing (Victor Dorobantu), Uncle Fester (Fred Armisen) and Pugsley (Isaac Ordonez) have all had their moments in the spotlight, with the latter freshly enrolled at Nevermore.

"[Pugsley's] always been the character that's the afterthought, even in the movies," says Gough. "We really wanted to bring him to the forefront and give him a story." Will fan favourite Cousin It be joining them soon? "We get asked that question a lot," he responds with a laugh. "The answer is, at the moment we can't say."

The Addams Family dynamic has, however, been shaken up already by the arrival of one Hester Frump (Joanna Lumley), affectionally known to Wednesday as Grandmama – Morticia's mother and a success in the mortuary arts, who's been coaxed into town on the hope she'll make a sizeable donation to the school. "It's a unique family dynamic that certainly gives great juice for the last half of the season as well," teases Millar.

> **"We really wanted to bring Pugsley to the forefront and give him a story"**

The "Frump" here is entirely ironic. She's being played, after all, by someone absolutely fabulous. "I remember we were in the writers' room and we were like, 'We'd love to get a Joanna Lumley type'. Then we were like, 'Why don't we just ask Joanna Lumley?'" Gough says.

Grandmama's arrival adds a few more layers to a season that's already rich with complex, nuanced female relationships: between Enid and Wednesday, Wednesday and Morticia, and Morticia and reformed mean girl Bianca (Joy Sunday). "I've always been just marvelled by Ms Zeta-Jones," says Sunday. "We share a birthday and so, from the first day that I heard I was working with her, it was insane. Getting to develop this relationship with her – moments where she says, 'I'm proud of you Bianca', I'm like, 'She's talking to me!' So that was easy."

There's also the matter of the mysterious new character who Wednesday liberates from Willow Hill and its nefarious programme of outcast experimentation, played by actor/director Frances O'Connor.

Fans will certainly have their suspicions about her identity – what exactly did happen to Morticia's sister Ophelia, after all? But the showrunners tease, "We want the audience to keep questioning Patient 1936's true identity and whether Wednesday made the right call by helping her escape."

O'Connor comes to *Wednesday* with her gothic credentials already in the bag, having written and directed the 2022 biopic about *Wuthering Heights* author Emily Brontë. "We were longtime admirers of Frances's work," Gough and Millar enthuse. "After meeting her over Zoom to discuss the role, it was clear she would bring something extraordinary. Her performance is so rich and unexpected, we kept writing new scenes for her."

PICTURES: JONATHAN HESSION,OWEN BEHAN,HELEN SLOAN/NETFLIX

The Addams family are delighted to meet you.

Billie Piper joins the cast as Isadora Capri.

Uncle Fester (Fred Armisen) is having a lovely time.

Whoever the character is, it's a sign that Wednesday's priorities have shifted dramatically since season one, back when she was toying with the romantic affections of two of her murder suspects. "If she didn't want to do romance before, it's really off the table now," confirms Gough.

Wednesday's ability to move between genres has always been part of its core appeal for the showrunners. "Look, it's always going to be horror, comedy, romance, adventure," adds Gough. "But you can weight those differently within a season, which for us was fun. There are so many ways that *Wednesday* could be a, quote, 'teen detective show' in a very straightforward way. But Wednesday never does things for the reasons everybody else does."

That includes any potential viral dance routines. When season one premiered, clips of Wednesday shimmying to The Cramps' "Goo Goo Muck", alongside people recreating those same moves, conquered the TikTok realm.

What no one could have predicted, however, was that those videos would spontaneously become associated with Lady Gaga's 2011 tune "Bloody Mary". Even Gaga eventually got involved. Now we've reached the logical conclusion: Mother Monster herself will turn up in part two, as the mysterious teacher Rosaline Rotwood, though any and all further details are a highly guarded secret.

What can be said is that she won't just be here to do "Goo Goo Muck: The Return". "We wouldn't want to try and replicate Jenna doing a dance but certainly, music and dance is a part of the show," says Millar. "The challenge for us is, how do you figure out something that scratches that itch in a surprising way, without feeling repetitive? That's always the danger. You can't be complacent."

The showrunners haven't taken it for granted that they're now caretakers to a character who's found a home deep in the catacombs of her audience's hearts. Autistic people often relate to her limited outward expression and black-and-white world view; others are drawn to her steadfast loyalty to her true self.

But *Wednesday* is also a reminder to us all that "normal" is a somewhat nonsense idea. As Doohan has observed, "So many people watching it feel like an outsider in some sort of way. I do find it funny that millions of people think of themselves like this when, clearly, if everyone's thinking this...

"It's touching that people feel connected to *Wednesday* like that." →

Steve Buscemi sleazes it up as newcomer Barry Dort.

HEART OF STONE

Georgie Farmer on where we find a post-break-up Ajax Petropolus

We left Ajax in a very interesting spot at the end of part one. Where's his head at when we see him again in part two?

After that whole conversation they have in the forest, at the end of episode three, he just knows he's gonna be fighting a losing battle. He's just really hurt by it. I think he probably needs some space and some time by himself. Which is hard when you're in school with someone and you're constantly seeing them all the time. He's heartbroken.

Have you had any conversations with Alfred and Miles about his family life, what his parents are like?

When we filmed season one, it clicked for me that obviously this Nightshades is a very secret society of the upper side of the school. So the fact that Ajax is in it made me think he must have some quite high heritage to be in that group. We didn't really speak specifically about family stuff. The most important thing about the Gorgons is that they're told to keep to themselves. A lot about this season for Ajax is about him becoming more comfortable in his powers. Hopefully, going forward, the Gorgons will be able to come more into their own, and we'll get to see them leading the pack a bit more.

What was it like working with Steve Buscemi this season?

We were all losing our minds when we found out it was gonna be him. I kept it maybe two days before I geeked out about his films, but he was so patient with us. I remember we went out for dinner and it's so nice to speak to someone who's been in this industry for such a long time, and he was so open with us and so generous with his time. Honestly, such a highlight. He's a gem.

DARKEST DAY

JENNA ORTEGA ON THE STYLE, STAKES AND NEW RESPONSIBILITIES OF WEDNESDAY

You're a producer on the show this season. What was it like to take on that new role?
It's been a really amazing experience being a producer on *Wednesday*. Now that I'm familiar with the team and we all know each other and have worked together for so long, it's definitely a comfortable, safe environment to ask questions and learn a bit more.

I've learned so much this season, and it's been so cool being a part of conversations. Talking about the colour of blood, or the colour of prosthetics and if the brain isn't big enough – things like that that are quite silly, but really do make such a big difference on the show. Getting to see everyone's costumes before they're approved, stuff like that, is very fun.

But then also in the constructive workspace, to be able to learn from someone like Tim [Burton] first-hand is a very special experience. Also, because I saw them every day on set, it was easier for them to just feed me knowledge in-between takes and things like that, which was really informative.

What has it been like seeing the massive success of this show?
It's still quite difficult to comprehend. I see the effects and changes that it's had on my life and my castmates' lives, but it's something that you're very detached from. If you see a number, it looks kind of crazy, but it's not like I've seen it in a room or anything like that. I just try not to pay too much attention to that stuff because success for me is more about feeling accomplished and being able to put something out into the world and feel proud. It's wonderful that it's been received so well, because there's a lot of pressure.

When we started the show, I was 18 and had never worked with a director as big as Tim. I had led a show before, but not with a character that was so well known and loved prior to me joining. It's a relief, but I would be lying if I said that I still don't feel super-anxious or feel like I have something I need to live up to every day on set. Maybe that's a good thing, but it hasn't gotten easier.

What was it like to collaborate with Tim Burton for a third time?
Working with Tim again was so much fun. He's one of the funniest people I know and probably my favorite director I've ever worked with, so it's nice to have gotten into such a routine. We've got quite comfortable, especially after *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* as well. We got so many opportunities to strengthen our dynamic on set, so it was really great to be able to anticipate what the other wants,

> **"I've learned so much this season, and it's been cool being a part of conversations"**

or doing a take and knowing, "Okay, well maybe he would enjoy it if I did something like this." As an actor, you want to take the director's lead and make sure that they're happy and comfortable, so it was nice getting to know him a bit more. I was maybe a little bit more confident or even rebellious in my takes because I knew that he'd always bring me back or would always get what he needed. He allowed me the room to play, which is really lucky.

What makes this season bigger and better?
The first season of any show, there's a little bit of trepidation, or there's trust, but still it's scary putting so much time and money and people into something and not really knowing where it's landed. Making the second season, we definitely put a lot more trust in our creative process and what we liked and what we didn't like.

This season, there were just so many big sets and so many big sequences that it was really exciting to go to set and wonder, "Oh man, I wonder what this stage will look like today, and I wonder what this person's going to be wearing today," and "I wonder what this character is going to look like?"

We had a lot of new faces joining and they all assimilated into the show so seamlessly and so well that there are plenty of new characters for people to learn to love – or maybe hate. It just feels like the show's been given new life, but Wednesday still remains very dead.

How would you describe your costumes in season two?
Honestly, I'm wearing a lot of the uniform. When we do see Wednesday's personal style, it's a little bit different. I wore a lot of jeans in the first season and bomber jackets, but this season I'm wearing a lot of skirts or really structured coats, so the lines are very sharp and precise and dense.

I've got a really cool '60s detective coat on for a majority of the season that cuts off; it has that flap all around, from the arms up. It looks pretty cool. I'd say it's maybe a touch more feminine, but we don't really see a lot of it. I have some cool sheer, tulle things, layering, everything. It's very gothic.

Wednesday part two is on Netflix from 3 September.

Wednesday and Dr Fairburn (Thandiwe Newton).

STOCK IMAGES: SHTONADO, IDIMAIR/GETTY

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

FROM THE US, THROUGH FRANCE, TO SPAIN, SFX JOINS THE GLOBETROTTING ADVENTURES OF EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE CROSSBOW-TOTING WALKER-STALKER, DARYL DIXON, ON HIS LATEST EUROPEAN ADVENTURES

WORDS: **HENRY CALVERT**

WITH THE SUN beating down on dusty streets, buildings a mixture of tans and oranges, this is certainly a far cry from the marshy landscapes and medieval architecture of Mont Saint-Michel. For *SFX*, Daryl Dixon and Carol Peletier have found themselves in the centre of Madrid, Spain, for the latest instalment in the Walking Dead Universe, season three of *Daryl Dixon*.

It's a manic day on set. As we enter, antiquated cars start firing their engines, horses covered in chainmail whinny, and crew members run about with boxes of weapons – arrows, swords and a familiar crossbow. As we're guided in by executive producer and showrunner David Zabel, we pass over 50 walkers packed into a makeshift walker-filled moat meant to protect the compound inside. What could possibly go wrong? On today's agenda: shooting it going wrong.

"This is probably the most difficult sequence we've shot so far," says Zabel. "It's a big climactic sequence in episode six of seven. We really want to bring a lot of value to our audience through our big set-pieces so we aim to have two or three per episode."

CRASH COURSE

As the crew prepare for a take the commotion ebbs to an anticipatory hush. A promenade of classic cars, equipped with all manner of apocalyptic armaments, passes through the compound; the vehicles come to a halt just before the moat of Walkers. On a monitor we can spy Norman Reedus, playing the titular Daryl Dixon, perched on a nearby rooftop, scoping out the situation and prepping his team of new friends to strike. After seeing Daryl conquer the apocalyptic US for 12 years, it's striking to see our hero framed against a picturesque Spanish backdrop.

"We always wanted to set the show in locations where the audience would be excited to see a different side to the apocalypse," whispers Zabel. "Of course, everybody was interested in England and London." Their first point of call in season three, before their voyage to Spain, sees Reedus and Melissa McBride share the screen with Brit Stephen Merchant, the only survivor from an apocalyptic London. "Working with Stephen was one of the happiest things that's ever happened," says Zabel. "He was always the number-one person we wanted for this role, we just love him. He brings so much to this character that goes beyond Stephen's natural comic ability. He brings such empathy and loneliness to the character and I can't wait for fans to meet him. The only downside of working with Stephen Merchant is trying to find a convincing body double because that guy is one of the tallest people on the planet.

"After that we wanted to find somewhere we could set a lot of the season that would feel very different from France and yet also be geographically logical. So we've ended up in Spain."

We cut through the set, past boxes of ornate regal Spanish flags, feeding horses and the 310 crew and 120 "el muertos" extras, all resembling cleaner versions of the Whisperers from season 10, with Walker masks in hand.

"Ninety-five per cent of the cast and crew are Spanish," Zabel tells us. "We really want to dive into the culture of whatever country we are in. The history, the geography, the architecture and art, and of course the people. It's a very different feeling to France and the US. There's an energy here, an intensity, a very distinct passion that plays into the characters and the stories that we create. We've leant a lot on the history of Spain. We talked about the history of the royalty, and how that could play into our story. Not only that but this is a place that had an autocratic leader for a long time with Franco, and how has that affected the people's frames of reference for their leaders."

> **"We really want to bring a lot of value to our audience through our big set-pieces"**

As we huddle, packed into a VFX tent, a call to action brings everything back to a familiar hush. As we focus in on a nearby monitor we see Alexandra Masangkay, who joins the cast this season as part of Daryl's crew as Paz, jump in a truck and violently reverse it into the main promenade of classic cars. Cars go spinning, walkers begin to groan in the moat, and that classic feeling of *Walking Dead* dread and anticipation comes flooding back. Just at that point there's a call to reset and Reedus appears, anxious to review the latest take. Reedus, who's held an executive producer credit across the previous two seasons of the show, is joined →

Norman Reedus and Melissa McBride return.

Alexandra Masangkay plays the capable Paz.

PICTURES: MANUEL FERNANDEZ-VALDES, CARLA OSET/AMC

Reedus has been playing Daryl Dixon since 2010.

KING OF THE APOCALYPSE

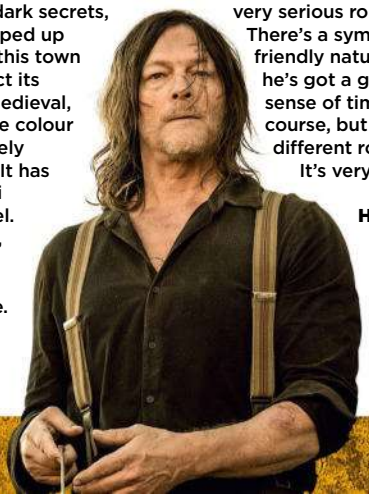
NORMAN REEDUS IS BACK AS DARYL DIXON

What challenges and opportunities do these new locations present to Daryl Dixon as a character?

They take a journey and, of course, end up in a sticky situation. The town they find themselves in has a certain set of rules and a lot of dark secrets, and they get wrapped up into the drama of this town and have to protect its people. It's very medieval, very European. The colour palette is completely different in Spain. It has almost a spaghetti western sort of feel. The dust, the heat, the colours, all make it feel much different to France.

We've got new locations and new characters to look forward to. Who are you most excited for fans to meet this season?

Stephen Merchant. I think people are going to be very surprised because even though he's naturally funny, he plays a very serious role here. There's a sympathetic, friendly nature to him, he's got a great comedic sense of timing, of course, but it's a very different role for him. It's very, very serious.



How do you hope this season of the show will stand out from the rest of The Walking Dead Universe?

We wouldn't want to just take a *Walking Dead* show and drop it in the middle of Europe, we want to incorporate our surroundings in our writing, our acting, our visual styles. The storylines feel Spanish, the dialogue is half in Spanish and that adds a very romantic feel to to our dialogue and our stories. Season three is just mind-blowing. It's really, really good.

With all the spinoffs, fans are keen to see you all reunited. How does it feel to potentially have that?

I'm all for it. It just has to be done in the right way and I know Andy [Andrew Lincoln] feels the same way. We can't just make a show and get them all together somehow. It has to fit organically. To be honest, the characters aren't the same characters as when they were together. They're completely different. Daryl's relationship with Rick wouldn't be the exact same relationship they had six years ago. All these characters have evolved. We're pretty strong over here in Europe right now. The network promotes the shows as The Walking Dead Universe, so they sort of put them together. But individually, our show is much different than those other shows. I don't know that you could just backtrack us from Europe and have it fit easily in that world. I'd love to see those characters in a room again, I'd personally love to see those guys again, but it has to be in a way that works.

McBride's Carol is very different from the comics'.

QUEEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

MELISSA MCBRIDE RETURNS AS FAN FAVOURITE CAROL PELETIER

How is Carol's journey this season going to differ to what she went through in previous seasons?

They both get reflective. It's a big deal leaving everything behind and finding yourself in a brand new, unfamiliar place. They get thrown back into a proper apocalypse, and even though they've acclimated to a certain point we see them almost start over in that regard.

What do you think will make this season stand out from the rest of The Walking Dead Universe?

It turns it a little on its head. I think the stories are more complex, it's more colourful, there's a little more dimension to it. I have a curious nature and I love seeing how the rest of the world is doing. How they've set up their systems to survive, and how you fit into it, how do you not disrupt their systems of survival or how do you flow with their systems of survival. I find all that very interesting.

You've been on this journey with Carol now for over a decade. When you look back to those earlier seasons, what do you hold onto and cherish from that time?

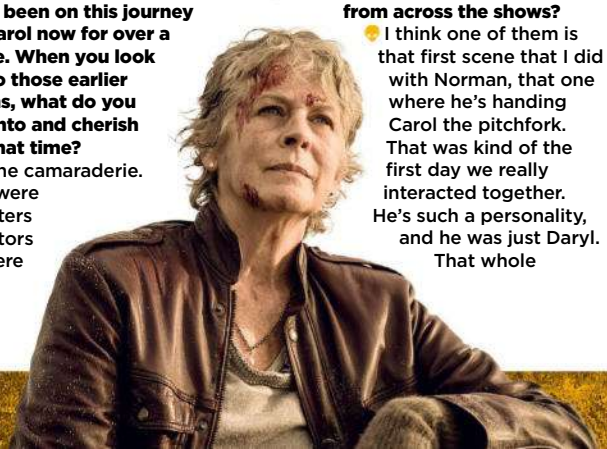
It's the camaraderie. There were characters and actors that were coming and going so quickly, and it's how welcoming everyone was, and also how respectful and grateful everyone was when they left. I truly cherish that sense of camaraderie.

Are there any standout Carol moments that are your favourite from across the shows?

I think one of them is that first scene that I did with Norman, that one where he's handing Carol the pitchfork. That was kind of the first day we really interacted together. He's such a personality, and he was just Daryl. That whole beginning was probably the most memorable, because nobody knew what was ahead for it. Everyone was working together for something everyone felt was really special, and I'm so proud of the journey the show and my character's been on.

With all the various spinoff shows and fans clamouring for a reunion, how does it feel as a cast, knowing that you could all reunite at some point?

That'd be a dream come true. I miss that cast, and as Carol I want to know where they are now? I think it would be lovely to see all of them catching up again and seeing each other again. Like, "Sorry, you and Negan did what?!"



this season in the behind-the-scenes chairs by co-star McBride.

"They love the behind-the-scenes experience," comments Zabel. "I think they love making the show in a new environment. Of course they love Georgia and the crew who worked on that original show but I think they find it so exciting to have a whole new crew of people around them who are all so excited about making their version of *The Walking Dead*. Norman and Melissa have just been brilliant at working with and interacting with the crew and welcoming new cast members, and that's such an important trait on a show like this. We are, after all, a road show: we'll go from Granada, to Seville, to Barcelona, new locations, different crew members. That's been a big change compared to how they shot the original series, and seeing them embrace that has been amazing."

EURO VISION

While Reedus's and McBride's tenure with the franchise has already spanned more than a decade, the debut season of *Daryl Dixon* marked showrunner Zabel's first foray into the apocalypse. Given how far the show has come from those early seasons – and not just geographically – we're keen to know how this season would fit into his initial vision for the show. "The initial goal was to maintain the quality of the franchise at its very best whilst advancing the story of *The Walking Dead*'s characters," he says. "We looked at the past and identified when the show was at its best, and then looked at what it was doing with its characters, what storylines resonated with fans, and then our job was to continue and grow that. We have these two fan-favourite characters in Daryl and Carol and our job was seeing what can we do to keep them alive and thriving, what situations we could put them in which wouldn't feel repetitive.

> **"The focus is always on the characters and their backstories and how to build on that"**

"We love Carol and Daryl and we always want to give them and our audience new experiences," he stresses. "Obviously, going to other countries and other cultures helps do that, but the focus is always on the characters and their backstories and how to build on that through the new environments."

We spend hours in the VFX tent, watching take after take as this truck continues to smash into ornate, delicate classic cars. While the main action is taking place, however, every single crew member, every monitor, every little bit of work carries an air of the apocalypse. Crew wrap blue tape around the hilts of swords where the blades should be; the VFX tent is alive with the glow of monitors each creating digital versions of explosions, baseball bats and blood splatters. A group of beautiful extras stand waiting to don their masks and transform into horrifying walkers. There's even a sizeable group of series fans waiting by the gates, anxious to get a glimpse of the action taking place beyond.

Given this is a franchise with spinoffs for each of its core characters, and a vocal fanbase, we're keen to know how the pressure from fans to reunite the core crew affected the development of the series. "My focus is on the world within this show. I don't consider it part of my responsibility to worry about when is Rick gonna meet Daryl again," says Zabel. "I sometimes have conversations with Scott Gimple [Chief Content Officer] about the wider Walking Dead Universe, but for the most part it's above my pay grade. We're fortunate that our show, more than any of the others, could be picked up by someone who'd never seen *The Walking Dead* and they could understand what was going on. Daryl is a stranger in a strange land when he washes up on that shore, there's a zombie apocalypse, he's going to find new ways to survive, meet new people, form new bonds, and you can go from there. We of course want to keep that core *Walking Dead* audience and we want to give them content they'll resonate with, but it's great our show can also be a starting point for new audiences."

For fans it's hard to know when or even if we'll ever see our core group of survivors together again. For now both Daryl and fans can indulge in their picturesque Spanish holiday featuring maniacal villains, plenty of gory action and a walker-filled moat. We know where we're booking our next European getaway...

The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon is on AMC and AMC+ from 7 September, and Sky/NOW later this year.

Spain offers a range of impressive environments.

Oscar Jaenada plays Fede, "mayor" of Solaz del Mar.

Eduardo Noriega plays Spanish ally Antonio.

STOCK IMAGES: MAGICPICS, HASE-HOCH-2, CAROL YEPES/GETTY

ONE LAST TRICK

THE WARRENS SUMMON UP THEIR FINAL FRIGHTS IN THE CONJURING: LAST RITES

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

TWELVE YEARS AFTER taking on the roles of legendary ghost hunters Ed and Lorraine Warren in *The Conjuring*, Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga return for one last stand against the paranormal in *The Conjuring: Last Rites*.

For director Michael Chaves, previously at the helm of *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It*, as well as spinoffs *The Curse Of La Llorona* and *The Nun II*, bidding farewell to the blockbuster horror franchise has been bittersweet."Endings are always tough," he tells *SFX*, admitting he would have happily kept making *Conjuring* films "until the end of time".

"I love working with everyone involved," he continues, "but there was a shared sense" – from creator James Wan to the producers at New Line Cinema – "that it was time to end on a high. You want to stop at the peak. You don't want to be the one who runs a franchise into the ground. This was a rare opportunity to choose when and how to tell that final chapter."

From the outset, Chaves says he felt a responsibility not just to honour the real-life legacy of the Warrens, but to deliver the most satisfying possible ending for the fans who've followed their cinematic journey. "I speak as someone who really loves the series and is fortunate enough to be a part of it, but especially as someone who completely fell in love with the first film. I really wanted to bring back that big *Conjuring* experience: that back-to-basics haunted house movie. To go out in that style."

There's always a temptation to pull out all the stops and go, as Chaves puts it, "dangerously big". "But scary movies, in general, really work best in their intimacy, in those isolated situations, those isolated moments," he stresses. "That feeling of dread doesn't usually come from big sequences. It comes from the simple, small ones. They're often the most effective." →

By this point, the Warrens have stepped back from the paranormal.

IT'S A SMURL WORLD

When it comes to specific plot details, Chaves is keeping his cards close to his chest. "There are certain things I want to keep secret," he insists, "because I think there's an incredible joy in seeing them for the first time." What he's happy to reveal is that the central story draws from one of the Warrens' final cases: the infamous Smurl haunting.

Beginning in 1974 and continuing for 15 years, Jack and Janet Smurl and their four daughters were, they claimed, terrorised by a violent demonic force in their home in West Pittston, Pennsylvania. As detailed in their 1986 book *The Haunted* – later adapted into a 1991 TV movie – the entity (allegedly) filled the house with foul odours and deafening noises, pushed one of the daughters down the stairs, threw their dog against a wall, and carried out repeated physical attacks.

Chaves promises a fresh perspective on the haunting, taking its lead from the daughters' recollections. "We did a series of interviews with them, and many of their stories went straight into the movie," he says. "Obviously, things get reshaped, but we talked to them about every detail."

The commitment to authenticity extended to the setting, at least in theory. In truth, the scenes set in and around the Smurl residence were filmed in England, just as much of *The Conjuring 2* was. "We basically rebuilt their house and surrounding neighbourhood," Chaves says. The production went to great lengths to be accurate, even down to a particular tree outside the family home. "We were debating whether we were going to include it, and I asked the sisters, 'Should we include it? Should we bring in this tree?' And they were like, 'You've *got* to have the tree!' So we put the tree outside their house." He adds, "We tried to make it feel as real as possible."

So why recreate a Pennsylvania haunting 3,500 miles away? "England's got the best people," Chaves laughs. "They're the hardest-working people."

> **"You get this larger feeling that the world doesn't need them anymore"**

That said, a "really fantastic" incentive was the UK's generous tax rebate. "But in all seriousness, it was my first time working in England, and I had an incredible time. The crew was absolutely amazing – we lucked into some of the most amazing people. And the actors. This is one of the best casts I've had."

The British contingent includes Elliot Cowan and Rebecca Calder as Jack and Janet Smurl, with Molly Cartwright, Kíla Lord Cassidy, Tilly Walker and Beau Gadsdon playing their daughters. Former *EastEnders* star Ben Hardy appears as Tony Spera, while Mia Tomlinson takes on the role of the Warrens' now grown-up daughter, Judy.

"The funniest thing: between the kids and the adults, who do you think would be better at the American accents?" asks the director. "The kids, which you don't expect. You'd think, for whatever biased reason, that adults would pick it up faster. But I was amazed. Our four young girls could just switch it on. We almost didn't even need a dialect coach. Every so often a rogue word would slip through, but they were incredible. But honestly, *everyone* was incredible. Everyone did a great job. On set they just stuck with it. Everyone was speaking in an American accent, so you had the illusion you were working with American actors. Some of the English crew thought we had brought in Americans for these parts!"

Chaves has always favoured practical over CGI in his horror films, and *The Conjuring: Last Rites* is no exception. "Even though VFX is useful in so many ways, audiences love it when you can get things in-camera," he says.

He admits that working with visual effects can be a slow and often tedious process, involving multiple rounds of notes and revisions. Practical effects, by contrast, offer an immediate payoff and, he adds, a more rewarding result. "Even if they get screwed up or they're messy, that's part of the excitement. It's a more fun process, and I think audiences can feel that."

One example from the trailer shows Judy Warren trying on a wedding dress in a fitting room, her reflection fractured across the mirrors. The effect was achieved using two-way glass. "There was an early discussion where some people on the production were suggesting we should use a blue screen," Chaves recalls. "The reference they would give was *X-Men: First Class*, which had a sequence in a mirror room. I love that in the movie, and I love the way that sequence looked.

"They were like, 'You can put the camera in anywhere, you don't have to worry about reflections. This is the way to go.' We really considered that. Even though there are limitations, if you're working with a real mirror room, those are worth it, because being able to see the real reflections – the actors seeing the real reflections, the crews

Evil doll Annabelle is still on the scene.

RUFFLING SOME FEATHERS

How a fowl interaction fed into the latest film

© WARNER BROS ENTERTAINMENT

Vera Farmiga had the chance to meet Lorraine Warren before her death in 2019. Chaves says the encounter influenced not only her performance, but also how the couple were depicted on screen.

"The Warrens kept chickens – you can see the coop outside their house in the earlier films – and Vera had this spontaneous idea to have a chicken walk through the house during a birthday party," the director notes of a scene in *The Conjuring: Last Rites*.

"At first, I was thinking, 'Chickens in the house? What are you talking about?' Vera said, 'I was at the Warrens' house, talking with Lorraine, and this little chick came in. She called to it – Larry, or something – 'Hey Larry, what are you doing in the house?', and then she shooed it out.' She thought that was so amazing and said, 'We've got to do that!'

"So we went outside, grabbed a chicken, and brought it in. There's a quick shot of her shooing it out of the house – and that was Vera's idea, drawn straight from life."

PICTURES: GILES KEYTE/WARNER BROS ENTERTAINMENT

In the trailer, this girl creepily scuttles towards Lorraine.

Last Rites will focus on the Smurl haunting.

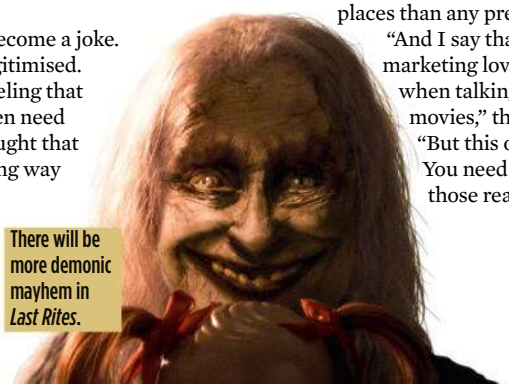
Just out of frame: a possessed toaster.

seeing the real reflections – you get this boost. Everyone feels like we're making something special when you see that stuff."

THE LAST GOODBYE?

Having stepped away from paranormal investigations, the Warrens begin their final chapter "at a great point in their lives", says Chaves. "They've decided they're not going to take any more cases, that they're basically done with it." Though they still give lectures at universities, the world has moved on. "In the first film, you see this packed auditorium," he notes. "I just loved that in this one, when the lights come up, it's basically empty. The few kids who are there are confused, thinking, 'Are you guys like Ghostbusters or something?'

"They've almost become a joke. They've become illegitimised. You get this larger feeling that the world doesn't even need them anymore. I thought that was a really interesting way to start the movie."



There will be more demonic mayhem in *Last Rites*.

Chaves believes Farmiga and Wilson carry a genuine sense of nostalgia for the franchise. "They love it. They feel so comfortable in it. It's kind of like coming back to your childhood house."

He says that the more he's worked with them, the more he's come to recognise their "fun little choices". "They've made so many specific dialect decisions for Ed and Lorraine – little things in the way that they talk, the way that they phrase certain words. It's a holistic approach in how they tackle it."

That same precision carries through in how their characters confront the Smurl haunting, a case Chaves says pushes them into darker places than any previous instalment.

"And I say that knowing full well marketing loves to use superlatives when talking about these movies," the director laughs. "But this one is *really* scary. You need those high stakes, those really dark moments to give you that sense of conclusion. You need to know that what they're going up against is..." He considers for a moment.

"We're going to be brutal. This is no-holds-barred. Going into it knowing that this is the last chapter allows us to be that ruthless. Even the first scene – it's going to take people off-guard. It really is a terrifying sequence and a real gut punch.

"We have a great conclusion to Ed and Lorraine's story," he adds. "I'm so excited for people to see it."

While the Warrens are bowing out, this isn't necessarily the last we've seen of the wider *Conjuring* universe, though. As glimpsed in the trailer, Annabelle and the rest of the haunted artefacts are still lurking in the shadows. When it comes to future spinoffs, Chaves confirms, "Anything is possible."

The Conjuring: Last Rites is in cinemas from 5 September.

WELCOME TO

THE UNIVERSAL MONSTERS COME TO LIFE IN NEW PERMANENT THEME PARK WORLD

DARK UNIVERSE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

FOR OVER 100 YEARS THE Universal Monsters have commanded our attention on the silver screen, cementing the success of their film studio along the way. Now those monsters are spilling out of the cinema and have taken up permanent residence in a new theme park world: Dark Universe.

One of five worlds at Universal Epic Universe, which opened in Orlando in May, their new home of Darkmoor Village is unlike anything you've ever experienced before.

"The reaction to Dark Universe is not normal and it's new for the industry," says Gregory Hall, Creative Director for one of the innovative new rides within, Monsters Unchained: The Frankenstein Experiment.

"The way Monsters Unchained was thought up was, 'What's the most messed-up thing that could happen to a guest? All the monsters getting loose.' This is one of the most advanced attractions of all time, period.

"We have *so many* animated figures," Hall says, noting that within the ride there's over 20 moving characters, 14 of which required them to invent new technology to make it happen. One of these is a full-size Frankenstein's Monster that walks. "And that's in the queue!"

Hall describes it as "a full immersion encompassing the entire legacy that brought Universal to life, because we wouldn't be here without these Monster films." →

He used to be a werewolf, but... actually he still is.

Darkmoor Village reimagines the Monsters timeline in present day, relocating them all to one space. It also reintroduces characters to an audience that might not be familiar with them, but in a way which still acknowledges old-school fans.

"Over the course of developing Dark Universe, Darkmoor and the story of Victoria, [great-great granddaughter of Henry Frankenstein] we actually were able to transition from the old black and white movies to a more modern take and to evolve these Monster stories, but say that we are still a part of that world and ask, 'What happened if that world evolved from 1931 until now?'" explains Peter Carsillo, Senior Creative Director for Dark Universe.

"Now we can look at not only appealing to our classic Monster fans, but also start to look at, how do we move these stories into the future and create an environment that builds new Monster opportunities? New stories and movies, like Victoria Frankenstein, so that the next generation of fans can start here and go forward."

Frances Franceschi, Production Designer for Monsters Unchained, tells *SFX* that plans for Dark Universe go back at least eight years. "It was a no-brainer. Universal Monsters was one of the first genres or lands or IPs that we talked about – that was almost a day one thing. It's the thing that is the most Universal in the entire park.

"We had to do our jobs as Creative to prove that we could build a compelling land, attraction, food and beverage mix," she elaborates. "We really needed to prove that it was going to be something that was worth the investment and bringing to our guests."

Creating something that would appeal to fans of different iterations of the monsters across that 100+ year legacy, Hall says they "worked consistently with Universal Pictures", who were on-site the entire time as both parties learned from each other.

"Our hope was that the fans would come to Darkmoor and say, 'Boy, we'd really like to see more,'" Carsillo adds. "Not just more attractions per se, which we would love to do, but also new media products, whether it's movies, television, streaming or gaming. There's so many different opportunities for jumping-off points here. What we were trying to do was not only tell the ultimate Frankenstein and Werewolf and Dracula's story, but also then say, 'Isn't this cool? Wouldn't we like more?'"

They say they're ready in case they need to return to expand what they've created and that it's specifically been designed so that it can be added to, noting "we can easily branch off and include other and new stories."

The land is absolutely full of storytelling lore – much of it offered from the outset, much more still available for fans to discover how everything connects.

"There's a shockwave that goes throughout the land, an energy pulse in the turrets of Frankenstein Manor, and that's Victoria using her experiment," Hall explains. "She's using the energy that actually drains the land. The land reacts to that, thousands of lights are flickering surrounding you, all programmed."

"We put thousands of little touches everywhere," Carsillo adds. "The well of Darkmoor and the whole underground world of vampires – we wrote all this stuff, but it

WHAT'S IN A WORLD?

Some of the things you'll find in Dark Universe

Monsters Unchained: The Frankenstein Experiment, a dark ride where the Universal Monsters escape as Dracula attacks.

Curse Of The Werewolf, a thrill ride coaster that sends you hurtling through a forest as werewolves hunt.

Roaming interactions with characters like the Invisible Man and Ygor, Victoria's assistant, and a meet and greet with Frankenstein and the Bride.

Heavily themed and immersive food and shopping experiences and monster makeovers.

Frankenstein's Monster and his not-so-blushing bride.

A coaster that'll have you screaming for more.

It's nice to get out now and then and meet the locals.

"The windmill's on fire!" "Yeah, it is good."

U GOT THE LOOK

Chris Frisella, Executive Producer for Dark Universe, on leaving no (head)stone unturned

"These are 100-year-old films, or younger, that are owned by Universal, but still there are agreements and contracts that were signed. So we have to go back and check those things. As we were looking at likeness rights, the legal team in Hollywood dug up the contract we had with Colin Clive (Dr Henry Frankenstein, 1931) to just check and make sure that we could use his likeness. Isn't that crazy? We saw in that contract the ship that they had booked them on, to travel from London to the United States. It was just really cool stuff. And we discovered that we could use his likeness rights!"

Truly shocking stuff: it's been raining in Orlando.

doesn't really become real until the guest lives it. To have that get picked up online is hugely exciting."

Another part of Dark Universe that's gone viral is the Burning Blade Tavern – an in-world bar that includes a full-size windmill that bursts into flames as in the original *Frankenstein* movie. The team note it stands out as one particularly memorable challenge of many.

"We had to create metal that could burst into flames every 20 minutes and then extinguish and go back to looking like wood," Carsillo recalls. "So we took on some really high tech work there in order to create [that]."

The result of all this work is like walking through a living, breathing Monster movie – with Monsters Unchained already being heralded by many as the best dark ride ever created.

"It's so in tune with the way that we think nowadays," Carsillo notes. "The psychology behind the design of the ride is that each of these things is playing out, and it's hitting you with something bigger and more amazing every few seconds, then turning you away, and then, boom, hitting you with another thing.

"It's very much aligned to our modern sense of attention and pacing. It's one of the reasons that Monsters Unchained feels so fresh, so current and like no dark ride you've ever been on, and it's because it's so aligned with the way our brains are wired now. That's pretty amazing. It's a really unique and incredible invention that the team did.

"We basically look at all of Dark Universe as one show," he adds. "Everything in the land is teasing up the peril and the danger of what Victoria is doing in the Manor. The vampire culture and how they've had a beef with the Frankensteins for 100 years, all these things are there to establish that story.

"But then once you come out, there's other monsters like the Invisible Man or characters that we didn't use in Monsters Unchained, Maleva and the Guild of Mystics or Monster Hunters, Pretorius the mad scientist. There's all these other layers that are there to fill gaps." Franceschi smiles. "It's been rewarding to see people that honestly probably don't prefer the Monsters or don't have a passion for them and they're still going to the world and riding the rides and walking out of it and being like, 'That was amazing.' That says a lot."

CREATURES OF THE NIGHT

The team also notes they had many horror legends working alongside them, including the likes of Rick Baker, Eryn Krueger Mekash, Norman Cabrera, Greg Nicotero – oh, and a certain Danny Elfman, who composed a brand new score for Dark Universe.

"When we rode [the rides] with him, he was just smiling non-stop," Hall grins. "He loved everything. He was proud to be part of it. These are legends that are clapping. They understand how difficult it is to work with the bar so high."

Fans of Elfman's work will be pleased to hear there are plans to bring the soundtrack to streaming platforms soon – with the vinyl repeatedly selling out each time it becomes available at Epic Universe.

"What's really beautiful about Danny and so many of the other Oscar- and Emmy-winning monster artists that worked on Dark Universe with us," Carsillo adds, "is that there was a real doubt that we'd get to collaborate with them. Danny was one where we said, 'Oh, we'd like Danny Elfman to do the music' and everybody said, 'There's no way, it's never going to happen.' So I said, 'Well, why don't we just ask?' Greg and I went out and talked to him about it and as we were presenting it, he was just pounding the table like, 'Yes! This is the right way to do it!'

"There were other make-up effects and monster folks that we'd walk through the project and they would just start laughing. I was like, 'Why are you laughing?' and they said, 'Because I never thought that somebody would put it all together like this. You've landed all the beats in one thing!'" ●

Dark Universe is at Universal Epic Universe in Orlando. Visit universalorlando.com. British Airways Holidays offers various travel deals staying at the new Universal Terra Luna Resort. Visit britishairways.com/universal.

A GLORIOUS, TWISTED IRONY OOZES from the heart of *The Toxic Avenger*, writer/director Macon Blair's reimagining of the '80s underground oddity turned cult favourite.

The tawdry tale of a health club janitor who emerges from a vat of toxic waste as a grotesquely mutated anti-hero, known to his friends as Toxie, is the grime-splattered crown jewel of Troma, the proudly disreputable indie production company that made its name on gleefully anarchic, unashamedly trashy B-movies. (*Killer Condom*, anyone?)

Blair's reboot, by contrast, is co-produced by Legendary Entertainment, the Hollywood powerhouse behind some of the biggest action blockbusters in recent years – including *Dune*. Speaking to *SFX*, Blair says the studio backing allowed him to embrace a luxury unheard of in the world of Troma: money.

"My perspective, having worked almost exclusively in the independent realm, is that the budget was enormous," he says. He credits it with the opportunity it gave him to work with "great actors" – including Kevin Bacon, Peter Dinklage, Jacob Tremblay and Elijah Wood – "talented craftspeople", and to play with "a really fun set of tools in the sandbox". Even so, his guiding principle for the reimagining was always that it shouldn't feel too expansive. "You know, mainstream."

Blair was also determined to preserve the original's tone – "that fringy, indie kind of vibe" – and to stay true to its guerrilla-style filmmaking: "To have the texture and feeling of a few guys with a camera on a tripod, shooting whatever they could." The film's design and photography were carefully shaped to reflect that sensibility, with "no big, swooping, overly complicated shots, or anything that felt like it was showing off budget resources." It's a rule he admits the team broke a couple of times. "But for the most part, we wanted it to feel like it had a homemade quality," he emphasises. →

TOXIC BY PROXY

HE'S BACK, AND IT'S ABOUT GRIME! **THE TOXIC AVENGER** IS REBORN

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

Toxie doing his Yoda/Obi-Wan crossover cosplay.

The Toxic Avenger boasts a trio of British national treasures in its cast: Sarah Niles as Mayor Togar, Annette Badland as shopkeeper Daisy, and Julia Davis as Kissy Sturnevan, associate of Kevin Bacon's villainous Bob Garbinger.

Blair says he'd been "enamoured" with Davis ever since seeing her in the BBC black comedy *Nighty Night*. So when a producer suggested her for the role, he jumped at the idea "and wouldn't let it go". "She took a little bit of convincing because she's more comfortable in improvisational settings," Blair explains. "We had a lot of conversations about how it would work on set. I was finally able to lure her in – and I'm so glad. It was a lot of fun turning her loose on set."

Peter Dinklage as Winston Gooze, before it all kicks off.

Blair cites Alex Cox's 1984 cult favourite *Repo Man* as a key influence. Like that film, *The Toxic Avenger* (2025) takes place in the real world, but it's a little *off* from the real world, he explains. "The details and things don't quite add up exactly right."

Toxie tips his mop to the titular cyborg in *RoboCop*, while the production design takes cues from Universal's *Frankenstein* and *Bride Of Frankenstein*. "You can see it in the bad guy's lair," notes Blair, referring to Bob Garbinger (Bacon), a mad scientist masquerading as a chemical factory boss. "It looks like a Frankenstein castle kind of place."

Production-wise, Troma founders and original *Toxic Avenger* directors Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz were involved "in a supportive sense", offering feedback and advice when needed. But otherwise, they stayed a step back. "Lloyd seemed to go out of his way to say that he wasn't going to get in the middle of things and try to control anything," Blair recalls.

"The thing he was consistent about was saying, 'Let's just make sure it's entertaining for the audience, however it works out.' I think that was his way of saying, 'Let's not have it take itself too seriously. Let's not make it all about business.' Which was the attitude I came into it with anyway, so we were aligned on that score."

OLD SCORES

Blair has put a fresh spin on Toxie's origin story, aiming to give long-time fans something new to enjoy. For starters, it has a very different protagonist. "In the original, he was a younger guy that is being picked on and wants to get closer to girls he thinks are pretty, and the bullies are being mean to him," says Blair of the original *The Toxic Avenger*'s downtrodden health club janitor, Melvin Ferd.

"It was more of an adolescent thing. I felt they had done that so singularly that there wasn't much value in recreating that exact thing. So we made him older. We made his problems more familial in nature. It's a different character. He's got a different name."

Enter Winston Gooze, a similarly downtrodden janitor at a chemical factory in Saint Roma's Village – presumably part of the same festering suburb as Tromaville. Winston is played by Peter Dinklage. "He's just one of those actors that I've admired for a long time," Blair says. "He does a great job of, like, he can be very serious and dark, and at the same time be kind of funny and empathetic."

With just 20 or so minutes of screen time before Dinklage's transformation, Blair felt he would make every moment count in winning over the audience. "So that when Toxie comes out under all the make-up, you're fully invested in him."

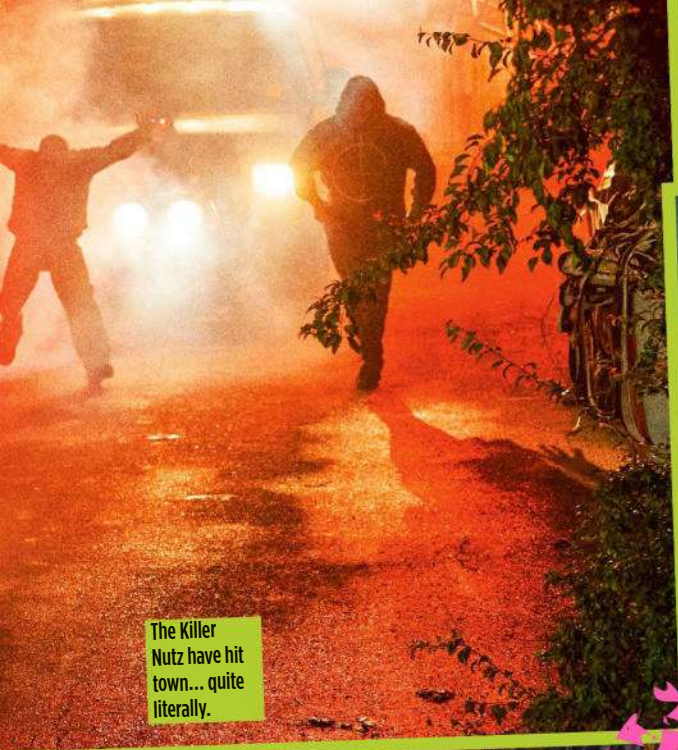
While the mop-wielding vigilante still carries all the iconic traits of the original – "he has muscles, he's kind of gross, he's wearing a tutu", according to the writer/director, "this is a different guy on a different journey". This time, he's out to clean up the town by taking down gangsters, corrupt CEOs and a deranged rock band known as The Killer Nutz, all while trying to rebuild a strained relationship with his stepson Wade (Tremblay).

What struck Blair about the original film was the disconnect he perceived between Melvin and his mutated alter-ego, played by Mark Torgl and Mitch Cohen respectively. "His voice changes and they do feel like two distinct characters," he says. "That's part of the charm of the movie. But what I wanted in this one was for it to feel like the same person all the way through. It's just Winston's exterior that has changed; he's still the same sad dude underneath."

Helping to maintain that continuity is Luisa Guerreiro, an actor, puppeteer and performance artist with experience in full-body costumes, having previously understudied Po in the 2015 *Teletubbies* reboot. "She was a trooper," Blair enthuses.

Filming in Bulgaria often meant working in intense heat, and the production team did their best to keep Guerreiro cool, pumping air into the suit between takes. "But there's no getting around the fact that she had around 25 pounds of foam on her and she's got to run around, jump, roll and deliver dialogue. There was not a hint of a complaint even once. She was

PICTURES: YANA BLAJEVA/LEGENDARY PICTURES



The Killer Nutz have hit town... quite literally.

"We prefer the term 'chemically altered'."

Bob Garbinger (Kevin Bacon): not mad, just curious?

Blair has scattered a handful of Easter eggs throughout *The Toxic Avenger*. "For example, there are newscasters who offer exposition throughout the movie, and the backdrop of their set is the Troma logo cityscape," he reveals. "If you're a Troma fan, you'll notice those and hopefully feel seen. If you're not, you're not going to miss anything." And be sure to stick around until the very end of the film for a very important announcement. Or three.

top-level cheerful the whole time. The funny thing is," he adds, "I got so used to hearing Toxie with a feminine British accent, it just became how I assumed Toxie talked. It was quite strange, many months later in post-production, to put Peter's voice over it. On the one hand, it felt very consistent because it felt like it was Peter the whole time. But there was a part of me that kind of missed hearing Louisa's voice coming out of his mouth."

Blair's approach to the gore dished out by Toxie – or more to the point, his radioactive mop – started with a question: what are the fans going to want? "I felt it was a certain gross-out-for-the-sake-of-entertainment quality that they leaned into in the original," he says. "I wanted to carry that over.

"We wanted it to play in a cartoonish way where even if it's gross, it's meant to be fun. It's never meant to be mean-spirited or cruel or gory in a way that makes you feel repulsed. It's meant to be gory in a way that makes you go, 'Hell yeah!' and have fun with it."

One sequence that proved especially tricky to pull off involves a villain who, without giving too much away, ends up being stuffed rather awkwardly into a car. "There ended up being a lot of moving parts – spinning the body around, hoses spraying blood – and it all had to be coordinated so things weren't falling over," Blair explains. "Our FX team really knew what they were doing. But getting that one up and running was a challenge."

Blair says filming the gore set-pieces took him back to being 12 years old, when he first saw the 1984 *The Toxic Avenger*. "It was hugely inspiring," he recalls. "We were just starting to figure out how to make our own movies in our backyard, and it was something of a template for that."

At that time, things like scripts, performances and lighting weren't on their radar. "What we were most excited about was the special effects, the blood and stuff. Getting to do it like this, where exploding heads are part of the movie's texture, really felt like a return to those old days and getting through the same sorts of science projects. Except now with very skilled technicians and craftspeople."

One of the new movie's most striking elements is Alex Cameron's production design. Tasked with creating St Roma's Village on a backlot in Bulgaria, Cameron conjured the crumbling streets and the gloriously tacky Miss Meat burger joint (formerly Mr Meat, who transitioned), all peppered with nods to Troma's back catalogue.

"Alex went in with his crew – set dressers, decorators, painters, craft people. Some he brought with him, some were Bulgarian," Blair explains. "They reskinned the whole place to give it its own identity. He was so clever about patchworking things together in a way that made it feel rigorously detailed, layered and lived in." That level of detail gives the film an added richness. "You can watch the characters in the middle of the frame, but if you want to, you can also look over here, and over there, and in the background. There's always some little side-story going on, if somebody were to watch it a second time and look for those things."

> **"It's meant to be gory in a way that makes you go, 'Hell yeah!'"**

Whether they're on their first viewing or their second, Blair hopes that audiences will simply have a "fun, rock and roll time. I don't want to say check your brain at the door like it's a bad thing – but check your brain at the door," he laughs.

Asked whether the film could grow into a franchise, Blair says that while it's too soon to say, he's left the door ajar. "We sprinkled in a few little Easter eggs that could support further adventures in different directions, if anybody has the appetite for that," he says. "If it happens that'd be very cool. I guess we'll see how things happen in August and go from there!"

The Toxic Avenger is in cinemas from 29 August.

STOCK IMAGES: PASEVEN, JOSE A. BERNAT BACETE/GETTY

KING OF

THE ROAD

DIRECTOR FRANCIS LAWRENCE TAKES A BREAK FROM THE HUNGER GAMES TO ADAPT THE LONG WALK, STEPHEN KING'S BRUTAL TALE OF ANOTHER GAME OF DEATH SET IN A DYSTOPIAN FUTURE.

WORDS: **JAMIE GRAHAM**

WHEN FRANCIS LAWRENCE (*Constantine*, the last four *Hunger Games* movies) was working on his 2007 adaptation of Richard Matheson's classic post-apocalyptic horror novel *I Am Legend*, his producer, Akiva Goldsman, slipped him a copy of *The Long Walk*. The book, written by Stephen King in his freshman year at college, 1966-1967, was one of five novels that the bestselling horror author went on to publish under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. Set in an ultra-conservative America of the future, it tells the gruelling tale of 100 young men (50 in the movie) participating in the ultimate sports competition – a 450-mile marathon in which the contestants must maintain a speed of 4mph. Drop below, and you're issued a warning, which is expunged if you then walk for an hour at speed. Creep up to three warnings and you're shot dead on the spot. The winner is the last man standing, and he himself can decide on his prize.

"Akiva gave me a copy, and I fell in love with it," says Lawrence. "It became probably my favourite King book, and one of my favourite books. It always stuck with me." Naturally, he looked into the film rights, but fellow King fan Frank Darabont (*The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Green Mile*, *The Mist*) had got there first, so that was that. All Lawrence could do was pass on his love of the novel to his youngest son ("He's a big reader... I gave it to him, it's one of his favourite books") and get on with his career. "Then, weirdly, it came back around maybe 17/18 years later," he grins. "I saw my son's copy laying on a shelf, and I thought, 'I wonder what's going on with *The Long Walk*'? That same day, I got a call from Roy Lee, who's my producing partner on this, saying he had got the rights and would I want to make the movie? I was like, 'Wow, that's so strange!'" →

The premise is a very simple one: walk or die.

Hamill drew on his time living around army bases.

Entrants are selected via ballot – only one will survive.

CASTING THE NET

One of the few King novels to have not been made into a movie, *The Long Walk* has always been considered a tough ask. Back in the late-'80s, King's pal George Romero owned the rights, but never cracked it, despite being the established master of apocalyptic visions involving stumbling hordes, having made the *Living Dead* trilogy. Lawrence, though, had no doubt that it was doable, insisting that the secret was to retain the emotional hook of the story while also ensuring that the intensity and abject horror of the situation was kept intact.

"You need to make sure that you really *feel* the miles and the time," he stresses. "That you feel the degradation emotionally, psychologically, physically. That you feel the weather changes." He sits forward in his seat. "I wasn't going to buckle on that. I knew we were making a tough one. It doesn't deserve to be PG-13; it deserves to be R. Stephen also said it had to be an R. To be truthful to the book, it has to be violent, intense, sad. It has to be a tough watch. Whether supporting the war thematics, the financial nihilism thematics, or the anti-violence thematics, it has to retain that intensity."

Determined to make *The Long Walk* as cinematic as possible, Lawrence approached JT Mollner to pen the screenplay, desiring a writer who was also a filmmaker. Mollner made a splash in 2023 with his fiendishly clever and twisted serial killer thriller *Strange Darling*, and was alive to the importance of not making the movie feel like a play as the contestants walked and talked for days, while also resisting the temptation to open it out through regular flashbacks that would relieve the tension and offer respite from the punishment.

Lawrence likewise knew that the movie would only work if these boots that were made for walking were filled by the right actors. "We got the best actors for the movie, not who has the most Instagram followers," says the director. "I'd always thought of Cooper Hoffman for Garraty. I'd never met Cooper, but I'd worked with his dad [Philip Seymour Hoffman, who starred in Lawrence's three *Hunger Games* movies]. I'd seen Cooper in *Licorice Pizza* and thought he was great. He's an unlikely hero; very relatable, very emotionally complicated. I mean that in the best way. There's an authenticity. As for David [Jonsson, *Alien: Romulus*], he was on the very first set of self-tapes. I thought, 'He *has* to be McVries'. I also thought, 'Holy shit, this movie's really going to work.'"

Raymond Garraty and Peter McVries are the two main characters. Like all the other boys, they've been selected to participate by ballot, and jump at the chance, as *The Long Walk* offers the only opportunity to escape the grinding poverty of this totalitarian regime. During the course of the relentless trek, Garraty and McVries form a deep bond. For the other principals – Stebbins (Garrett Wareing), Barkovitch (Charlie Plummer), Olson (Ben Wang), Harkness (Jordan Gonzalez) and Parker (Joshua Odjick) – Lawrence followed Francis Ford Coppola's example on *The Outsiders*, auditioning all of the actors for all of the supporting roles to find the best fit.

When it came to casting The General, there was only one choice – and it might not be who you first think of when picturing a gruff military man who each year oversees the walk, flanked by his soldiers. "I started to think about Mark Hamill in the most recent *Star Wars* movies," says Lawrence. "I loved this weariness to him. I felt this gravitas. I also knew that he'd

PICTURES: MURRAY CLOSE/LIONSGATE

Mark Hamill chews scenery galore as the Major.

done a ton of voice work. So I set up a Zoom, and he told me that he grew up around military bases. He said, 'I know this guy' and instantly started talking in this voice, with this accent." We never truly see Hamill's face, for The General wears his impenetrable sunglasses at all times. "That came from the book. There's something about keeping him faceless."

AMERICAN LIFE

Hamill, Cooper, Jonsson and the rest of the cast are excellent. But equally key to the film's success – it is, no doubt, in the top tier of King adaptations – is the location shooting. While the novel unfolds in King's beloved home state of Maine, with its windy roads and forests, the movie is set in unspecified territory and was shot in the Canadian province of Manitoba. This was partly a budgetary decision, shaving 10% off the film's cost, but the vast landscapes also add to the terrible oppression of the formidable task at hand (or rather, foot).

Lawrence puffs out his cheeks. "The roads feel *endless*," he says. "If you have turns, there's a mystery that's drawing you around. But there's something here... how flat it is and how far in the distance you can see and how little the scenery changes and how big the skies are... it's kind of mind-boggling. I think that added to feeling the psychology of, 'How far am I going to walk, how long will it take me to get there?'"

The topography made for a brutal shoot, the actors sometimes walking three quarters of a mile on a single take, then having to be driven back to do it all again for take two. And three. And four... Cooper and Jonsson walked more than 350 miles in all. Sunburn and blisters and pulled muscles were part and parcel of the journey, but the actors leaned into the pain, letting it inform their performances. The film was shot chronologically, their degradation recorded.

"When we were scouting, we would drive for hours and hours and hours and hours and hours, and it was field after field after field and a gas station; field after field after field and a gas station," continues Lawrence. "What I fell in love with is the timelessness and the American gothic quality of it, with these weird little churches in the middle of nowhere."

King, who always has script approval on his films, was happy with the changes, giving a big thumbs-up to not just the switch of terrain, but some major plot alterations that will not be spoiled here. The essential thing for him was that the movie should honour the spirit of the book. When he wrote it, *The Long Walk* was intended as an allegory for the Vietnam War. Now, the film plugs into the financial nihilism of today. The times have changed, but the anti-authoritarian stance remains the same.

"The American Dream has now gone," Lawrence shrugs. "In general, people are not going to make enough money to buy a house and have kids and send them to school and put food on the table. But it's not just an American thing, it's a worldwide problem. So to set a story around a group of young men who are desperate enough to do something like *The Long Walk* because of those needs – that's the thing that makes it so relevant and timeless."

And one of the things that makes this fierce, grimly violent movie rather remarkable is that it locates optimism within this cruel, hardscrabble world. *The Long Walk* is a humanistic film, with much of its hope and celebration of the indomitable human spirit filtered through McVries. Right from the off, as the starter gun is fired, McVries evinces spirit and compassion; while other walkers trade ball-busting banter that tilts into hostility, or demonstrate a barbarous competitive streak, McVries refuses to have his humanity crushed under the heel of the system.

> **"To be truthful to the book, it has to be violent, intense, sad. It has to be a tough watch"**

"The thing that always stuck with me [upon reading the book] and why I love it is the emotional bond of the boys," nods Lawrence. "Other movies that people lump into the category of *The Long Walk*, where people are in competition and death is at stake, don't have people bonding with one another, and supporting. That's one of the things that I hope people take away from it – the idea of friendship, as opposed to the dystopian elements."

Other movies that people lump in... like *The Hunger Games*? "I know people like to wrap things up in a bow and put things in little boxes, but for me, *The Long Walk* is thematically and emotionally very different. It really is about brotherhood and camaraderie." Lawrence chuckles. "And Stephen King came up with the idea before anybody."

The Long Walk is in cinemas from 12 September.

LIVE AND LET DYE

NERD UP! STEVE AGEE DANCES BACK AS JOHN ECONOMOS IN PEACEMAKER SEASON TWO

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD** • PORTRAIT: **STORM SANTOS**

JUST WHERE DO YOU GO AFTER chainsawing a gorilla?

"That's a hard one to top," reflects Steve Agee, tackling a question perhaps no other actor in history has had to confront. "That's a high point, I think, for Economos!"

Tech geek, tactician and owner of suspiciously dark facial shrubbery, John Economos had his memorably bloody skirmish with a primate in season one of *Peacemaker*, James Gunn's salty but emotionally loaded spin-off from 2021's *The Suicide Squad*. Now this agent of ARGUS is back for season two, once again caught up in the life of John Cena's chrome-helmeted "d-bag" of a superhero.

"I think it's pretty clear at the end of season one that the gang has kind of disbanded, with the outing of [ARGUS boss] Amanda Waller and everything," Agee tells *SFX*. "When we come back in this season, everyone's pretty spread out in different corners of the show's world, and I'm really the only guy who's doing the same thing. I'm the least down-on-my-luck of anyone in the gang at this point. There's a whole bunch of new characters. I have a new boss and new co-workers. It's really exciting. It's a much more epic world this season."

And that shake-up of the ARGUS command structure promises to be explosive. Joining the cast is Frank Grillo as hard-bitten military veteran Rick Flag Sr. Recently glimpsed in Gunn's big-screen *Superman*, he's packs a decidedly personal grudge against Peacemaker.

"He's my new boss. He's taken over from Amanda Waller. There's a lot of tension this season in that Peacemaker killed his son – he's the father of Rick Flag Jr, who was played by Joel Kinnaman in *The Suicide Squad*. So there are a lot of awkward moments, a lot of tense moments, because he's now completely involved in Peacemaker's life."

With season two comes a revamped title sequence, a whole new boogie to beat the meme-worthy dance-off we saw last time around. Does Economos bust out some fresh moves or does he stick to the classics?

"It's a completely new dance sequence," reveals Agee. "I think that first dance we shot in a day. The new one we shot over two days, with probably twice as many characters. So it was a lot more intense. It's more lights and more people and more moves. I'm a big, out-of-shape guy. It was exhausting! One of my favourite parts of the show is the opening dance number but honestly, it's one of my least favourite parts of shooting. I'm drenched in sweat five minutes into starting. But the new dance number is incredible. Charissa Barton, who's our choreographer, did an amazing job."

Introduced in issue one of *Suicide Squad* in 1987, Economos is a deep-cut pull from the printed DC universe. "Really he's a glorified extra in the comics," says Agee. "We know that he's the warden of Belle Reve prison but outside of that one of the only characteristics I could pull from this guy was that he had several ex-wives! But James really gave him a similar voice to my own, kind of a reluctant wise-ass. He really is me. The thought of going out and doing something adventurous is really terrifying to me."

Agee and Economos have also had to share that notorious dye-job of a beard, of course.

"When we did the movie we were looking at the character in the comic books. His beard is black. I have a Santa Claus white beard. They dyed it pretty natural to match my red hair. We showed James and you could see the moment it hit him – 'Oh my God! You know what would be really funny is if it was just shoe-polish black!' So we did it, and it's never mentioned in the movie; there's no pay-off. I just look like an asshole! They'd say cut at the end of the day and I'm still stuck with this horrible beard, going to the grocery store..."

That pay-off finally came at the end of *Peacemaker* season one in a typically Gunn-style moment of pathos unfolding inside a gag. "That speech at the end, it's so heartbreaking. I just remember once we started shooting that scene I was completely fine with having to live the way I did for half a year."

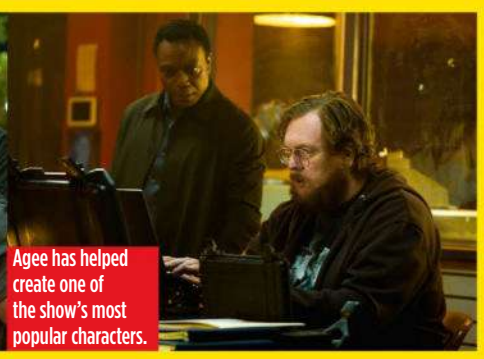
Is Agee ever tempted to touch up his own whiskers? "Oh, I do all the time!" he laughs. "We did a photo shoot this past Monday. I'm a little self-conscious of the fact that I'm getting older and the beard's getting whiter. We coloured it a little bit, but *very* subtle..."

Peacemaker is on Sky Max and NOW from 22 August.

STOCK IMAGES: NEUEVECTOR; OZGURDONMAZ/GETTY

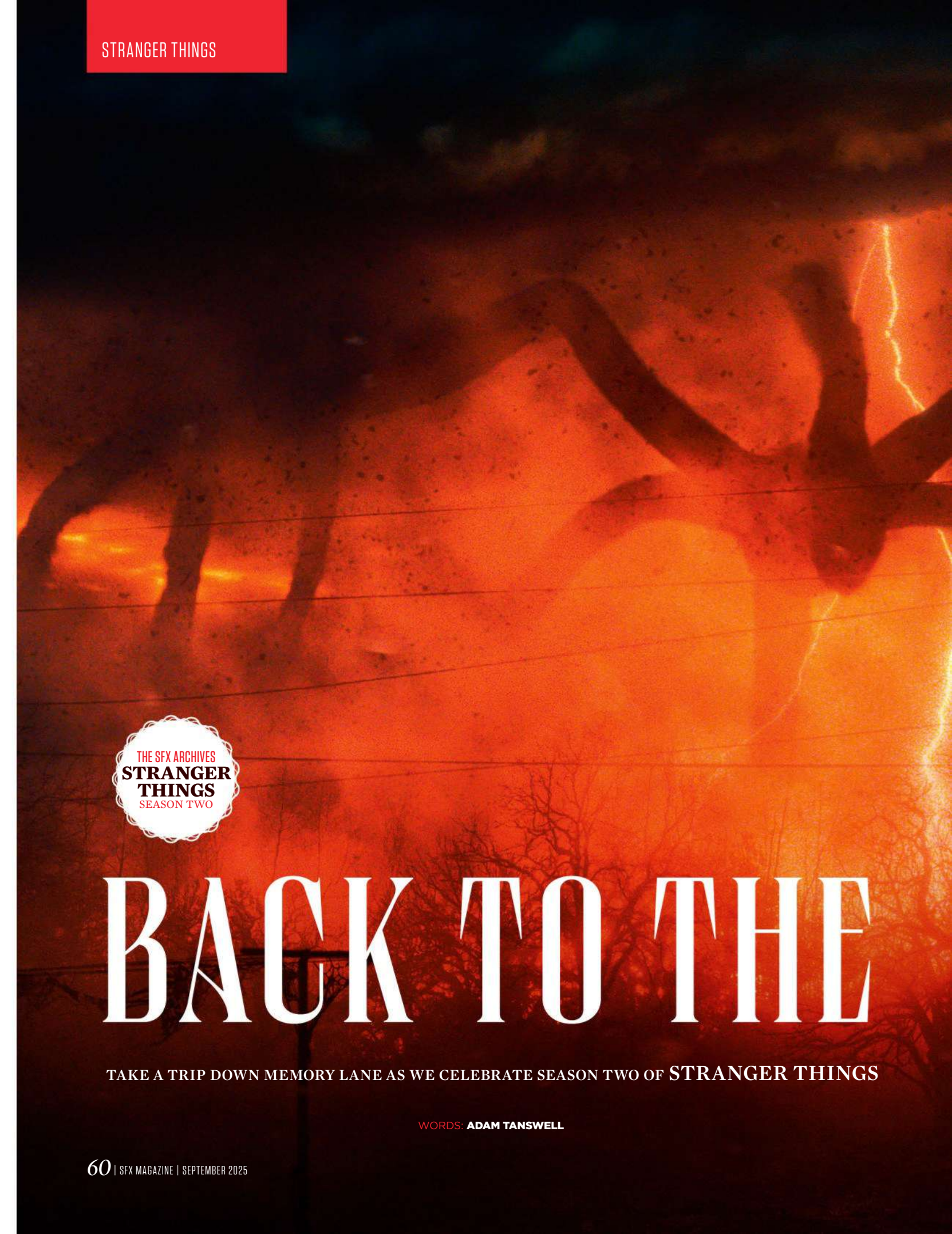
Season one saw Economos support Peacemaker.

The gang bonded, but things are set to change...



Agee has helped create one of the show's most popular characters.

> “I’m drenched in sweat five minutes into starting, but the new dance number is incredible”

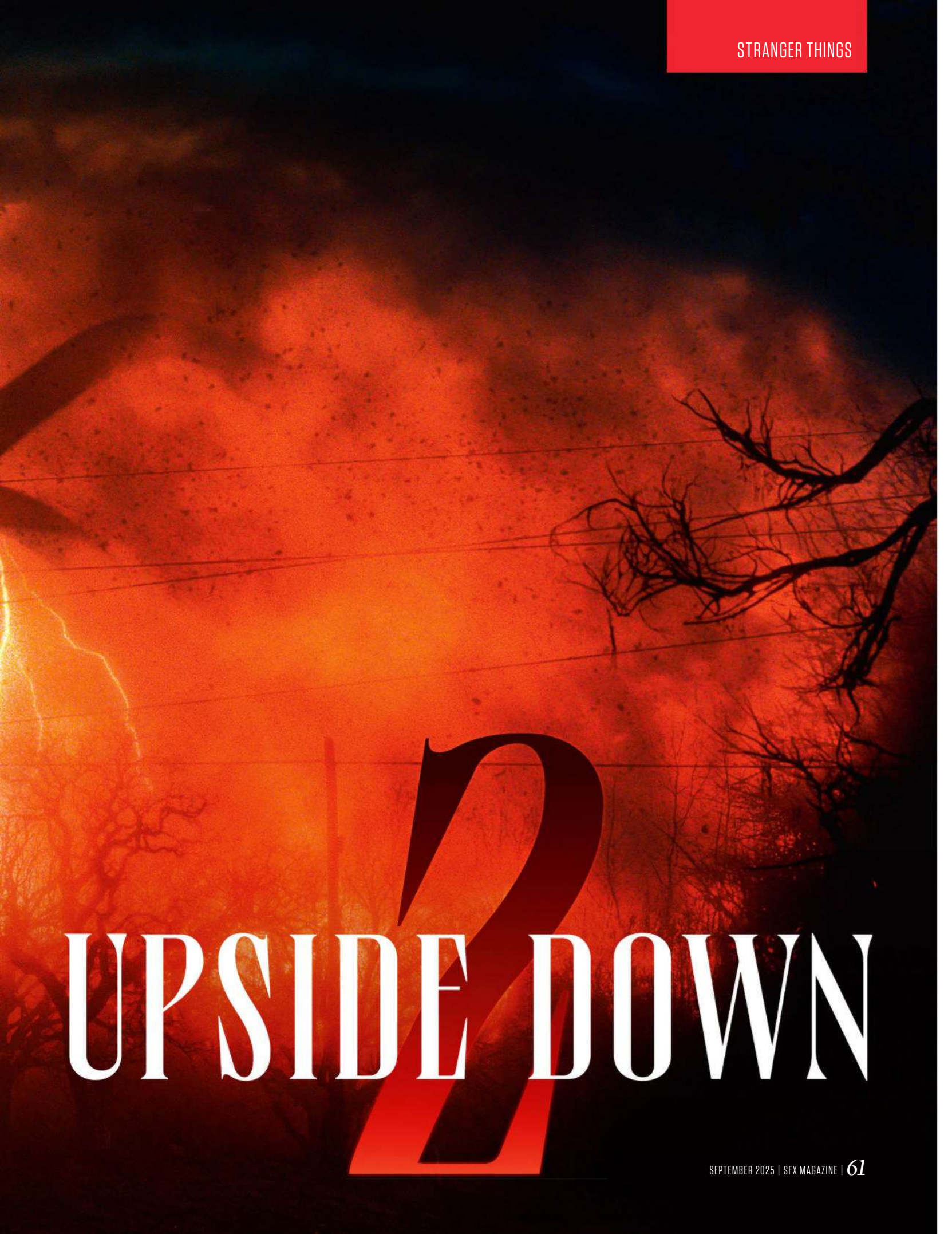


THE SFX ARCHIVES
STRANGER THINGS
SEASON TWO

BACK TO THE

TAKE A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE AS WE CELEBRATE SEASON TWO OF STRANGER THINGS

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**



UPSIDE DOWN 2

Who you gonna call? Demogorgon busters.

New kid in town Max (Sadie Sink) with Dustin.

SEASON TWO: THE EPISODE TITLES

CHAPTER ONE
MADMAX

CHAPTER TWO
TRICK OR TREAT, FREAK

CHAPTER THREE
THE POLLYWOG

CHAPTER FOUR
WILL THE WISE

CHAPTER FIVE
DIG DUG

CHAPTER SIX
THE SPY

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE LOST SISTER

CHAPTER EIGHT
THE MIND FLAYER

CHAPTER NINE
THE GATE

Mike getting to grips with an arcade machine.

Step into the *SFX* interview archives for exclusive, all-new treats from past seasons of *Stranger Things*. Whether you want behind-the-scenes secrets from the cast and crew, on-set stories from your Hawkins favourites or interviews we've *never* published before, we've got you covered. As the final season of *Stranger Things* draws closer, this is the perfect prep for your upcoming season five binge.

ON 27 OCTOBER 2017, THE second season of *Stranger Things* dropped on Netflix, and audiences went wild. The Duffer Brothers triumphantly returned to the small screen with Hopper (David Harbour), Joyce (Winona Ryder), Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and the gang of bike-riding buddies for nine episodic doses of supernatural scares and Mind Flayer madness. For season two there were some additions to the story in the form of skateboarding teen Max Mayfield (Sadie Sink), Max's mysterious stepbrother Billy Hargrove (Dacre Montgomery), Joyce's rather bumbling love interest Bob Newby (Sean Astin) and the enigmatic Dr Sam Owens (Paul Reiser). Millions across the globe tuned in.

When the action begins, it's 28 October 1984 and the camera focuses on a star-filled sky before panning down to an urban city street. It's been close to a year since we last saw Hawkins, Indiana, but the season two story opens in a new location: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Viewers are introduced to an intriguing new character with a bloody nose and "008" sinisterly tattooed on her wrist. Sound familiar? Yep, we're back in the world of *Stranger Things* – complete with new mysteries, new creatures (*hello Demodogs!*) and even more danger from the Upside Down.

"We were in our own little bubble making the first season of *Stranger Things*, and the success was a surprise – but by the time the show came out, we were already working on season two," Matt Duffer told *SFX* during an interview at San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) in July 2017. The *Stranger Things* co-creator was animated and excited as he chatted away after a jam-packed Hall H panel, where the team premiered a new trailer and answered questions from a hyped-up crowd.

He continued: "We had already mapped out where we wanted to go with season two. In fact, we have a rough idea and we have a rough arc for the entire show – but just because it's successful doesn't mean that we want it to go on and on. We want to keep it compact. We want to go out on top."

STRANGER SECRETS

The colossal success of the series came with setbacks, which included the need for increased security and secrecy for the cast and crew – and even the scripts. "We literally consulted with a *Game Of Thrones* producer to learn about their security protocols," revealed Shawn Levy in Los Angeles in June 2017. "Suddenly, if we threw out our script at the end of the day, someone might go dumpster diving and leak a spoiler on the internet."

The threat of leaks led to some interesting secrecy measures for the cast – including wigs and cloaks to hide the leads. "We weren't allowed to say a thing," continued Millie Bobby Brown. "And we're still not. We have to throw away our sides [of the script] every second. It was top secret. When it hadn't been announced that I was coming back, I had to wear cloaks coming on set. Cloaks!"

With paparazzi photographers camped out at the airport waiting for a season two casting scoop, Millie added: "When I went through Atlanta Airport, I'd wear wigs. It was so weird. Then, when it finally got out [that Millie was confirmed for season two], I thought, 'Phew'." Audiences across the globe studied season one

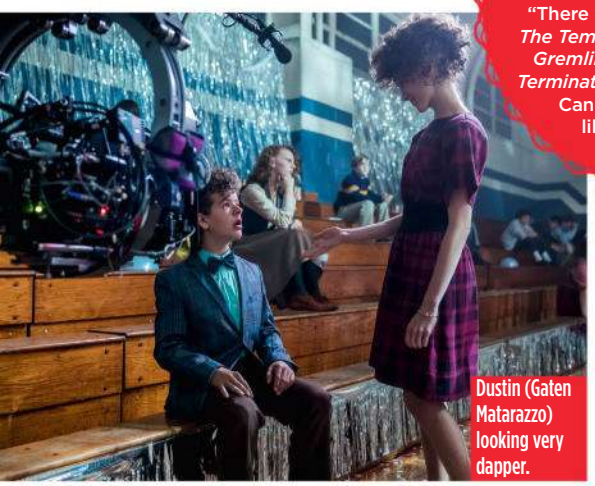
ALL PICTURES © NETFLIX

Eleven goes through a rebellious phase.

Millie's season two return was a tight-kept secret.

Bad-boy big brother Billy (Dacre Montgomery).

Fan favourites Hopper and Joyce Byers.



Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) looking very dapper.

in microscopic detail and would often speculate some rather wild ideas. "I have the best fan theory ever," David Harbour revealed to *SFX* in June 2017. "We've been shooting season two since November [2016]. When the Super Bowl trailer dropped [in February], it announced that our show's airing at Halloween. There was a very convoluted, eight-page theory on Twitter about how that was all a ruse and Netflix was going to drop it in March."

The actor continued, with a smile: "I was, like, 'That's amazing, dude. I wish it was true, but I guarantee that we're not even done shooting.' He went through all kinds of numerology and all sorts of images and symbols."

Harbour himself nearly spilled on-set secrets after being caught up in a sneaky catfish scam. "We had a director for episode seven, a woman called Rebecca [Thomas]," admitted the Hopper actor. "I got trolled on Instagram by some dude who pretended to be Rebecca and reached out to me. I didn't know her that well, but she started talking to me [on Instagram] about the episode and I responded – but, literally, I got an onslaught of messages from other fans going, 'This guy is not the director. Stop talking to her. We don't want to know'."

BLOCKBUSTER EVENT

Season two is set in 1984, which was a huge year for movies. "It was such a great year," enthused Ross Duffer, speaking in June 2017. "There was *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom*, there was *Gremlins* and *The Karate Kid*. *Terminator* came out in October. Can you imagine a year like that anymore? It's insane."

The internet troll in question later apologised to Harbour: "The dude himself was, like, 'I'm really sorry, man. I did a bad thing. I wanted to get something out of you.' You know, people have surprisingly mixed feelings. They want to reach in, but they also want to preserve it and be protective of their experience with the show."

Speaking about the core of fans who clearly want to steer away from spoilers, Harbour added: "I think there's an interesting wave of protectiveness of our show. Instead of tales of dumpster diving, I've experienced the opposite – people come up to me and say they really want to preserve the purity of the experience. People are, like, 'Don't tell me, I don't want to know. I really don't want to know'." →

BILLY BANTER

DATE: 22 July 2017
LOCATION: San Diego, California

Step back in time to the summer of 2017, where Dacre Montgomery chats backstage at SDCC and reveals his intriguing new *Stranger Things* character

What do you enjoy most about playing Billy Hargrove in season two?

I am playing a sort of antagonist in the show – and I think the reason that antagonists and villains are so interesting is because they are unpredictable. The Duffers give us a lot of room to play. They make unique and interesting decisions. Because my character is unpredictable, it makes it a lot of fun to create and play that dark nature.

Why do you think *Stranger Things* is so successful?

I think the demographic for the show is so large because it's relatable and it's a coming-of-age story. Look, these kids are going through puberty and everyone in this room has been through that. I think that is so interesting, and that's why I fell in love with the first season – because it's like these kids are going through all the same stuff we went through.

What drew you to the show in the first place? Was it the nostalgia of the piece?

I wasn't born in the '80s, so I don't have the nostalgia of the time and the clothes and the music – but I have the nostalgia of being a kid. I have the nostalgia of that really rough time in your life when you are experiencing things that are new and challenge you.

What was life like on set?

Between the kids, the teenagers and the adults – if you want to call them that – our dynamic on set has been so lovely because we are all at different stages in our lives. It's been really nice.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION...

FROM THE SFX ARCHIVES
DATE: 22 February 2017
LOCATION: Atlanta, Georgia

SFX: LIVE ON THE *STRANGER THINGS* SET

The kids get into spelunking.

Hopper has to adjust to being a parent.

IT'S THE 22ND OF FEBRUARY 2017, and *SFX* is standing in the middle of an unusual art gallery located on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia. Instead of intricate pieces of framed artwork and abstract paintings on the walls, they're adorned with photos, newspaper scraps, maps and charts. Shelves are haphazardly stacked with folders, notepads and books – and there are retro radios and television sets scattered around the space. Today, the team is filming episode six of the second season of *Stranger Things*, and we're on the top-secret set to watch the action unfold live in front of our very own eyes. Giddy doesn't sum it up.

Natalia Dyer (Nancy Wheeler), Charlie Heaton (Jonathan Byers) and Brett Gelman (conspiracy theorist Murray Bauman) sit at a small, round table eating breakfast. We're inside Murray's rather messy residence the morning after Nancy and Jonathan hook up for the first time. If you remember correctly, the teenage lovebirds are on a quest to seek justice for Barbara – and Murray might have some answers.

Director Andrew Stanton – of Pixar's *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* fame – throws around some ideas for the cast from behind a camera set-up. *SFX* observes from the corner of the room with glee. In season two, Stanton has been added as a director for two episodes – and you can tell that he's a big fan of the supernatural series.

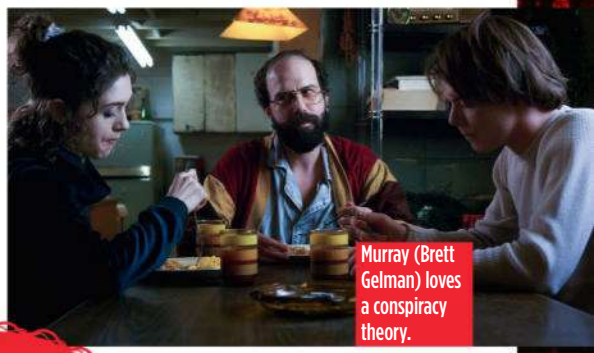
"I binged the first season of *Stranger Things* and it made me feel like a kid again," explains Stanton, taking a quick break from directorial duties. "I absolutely loved it. The Duffers got across exactly what we were trying to do when we started at Pixar; it's the same kind of innocent, pure wonder of cinema. There's a sense of danger, but it's irreverent, real and sincere. I just recognised it so much and I wanted to be involved."

What exactly's shooting today? "Earlier this morning, we shot a scene where Murray talks about the whole world of conspiracy theories and stuff," says Stanton. "It was a fun scene. Now it's a breakfast scene in this crazy set-up. This is an art gallery and we've taken up half of it. We've turned it into this crazy guy's loft."

> **"I binged the first season of Stranger Things and it made me feel like a kid again"**

An hour later, *SFX* is whisked away to EUE/Screen Gems Studios, now known as Cinespace Studios Atlanta. Here, we are allowed to wander around the static sets of season two, which includes some faves from the past. The vast sound stages house a number of iconic interiors, including Hopper's cabin, which is in an unexplained state of disarray,

Mike (Finn Wolfhard) with the Duffers on set.



Murray (Brett Gelman) loves a conspiracy theory.

ROOM FOR CHANGE

"I smiled when I first saw Dustin's bedroom," admits Gaten Matarazzo, speaking on set. "I feel like he hasn't changed the décor in a while, but there's so much character to the room. It's really cool."

Lovebirds Nancy and Jonathan grow closer.

Dustin learns that owning a pet is a big responsibility.

clinical laboratories and the ever-so-familiar basement where the boys play games of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

There's also a mammoth sound stage that contains the rift, the portal that connects Hawkins to the Upside Down. Vine-like tentacles reach across the space, and you start to feel engulfed by the magic of this supernatural world. Hairs on the back of your neck begin to bristle.

Stranger Things production designer Chris Trujillo takes us on a quick tour of the Byers home. "This is Jonathan's bedroom," he explains, standing in the middle of the teen's rather messy space. "On the right down there is Will's bedroom. On the left is Joyce's bedroom."

When *SFX* reaches the cosy lounge, we notice that the Christmas lights used by Will to communicate from the Upside Down in season one have been replaced by strange, hand-drawn sketches. "We were pretty sick of the Christmas lights by the end of last season," chuckles Trujillo.

Does that mean there are no Christmas lights in season two? Trujillo reveals: "We didn't want to beat that horse again, so we have the drawings this season – although I guess there are a few Halloween-inspired fairy lights in the house to commemorate October 31. That's when the story starts this season. It's Halloween and the story is really fast-paced. You'll be amazed at how much happens so quickly."

When a break in filming allows the young cast to chat, we ask them how their lives have changed since season one.

"It's been a journey, I can tell you that," giggles Gaten Matarazzo. "It's very rare that something this exciting and something this big ever happens, so I am honoured to be a part of this amazing project with these awesome dudes."

"People come up to me and say my full name now," adds Caleb McLaughlin. "And people cry over me. I also get to go to awesome events and win awards – and I get to meet my idols that I watched on TV when I was little. Those are the things that have changed in my life."

"It's crazy to know that just one year ago we were filming this tiny show on this stage," continues Noah Schnapp. "I don't know how to explain it, but there's a big feeling of craziness. I get stopped on the street and people know my name – even when my hair is up. I don't know how people recognise me, but they do."

"I don't think my life has changed," muses Millie Bobby Brown. "Of course, it's gotten a lot more hectic and busier – but in such an incredible way. I don't know what I would have done without being on *Stranger Things* – but I'm very excited for this season to come out so you can experience it all over again." →

THE DUFFER BROTHERS

Reliving the highs and lows of prom.

THE UNPUBLISHED *SFX* INTERVIEW

Speaking via video link to the boardroom of EUE/Screen Gems Studios in Atlanta, Matt and Ross Duffer chat about *Stranger Things* storylines, season two strengths and Sam Raimi inspirations

FROM THE SFX ARCHIVES
DATE: 22 February 2017
LOCATION: Via video to Atlanta, Georgia

Please take us back to the very beginning. What was the genesis of the show?
Ross: Going back to the genesis of *Stranger Things*, we were really excited by what television was doing – specifically filmmakers that we admired, like Steven Soderbergh with *The Knick* and what Cary Fukunaga was doing with *True Detective*. We always loved TV, but movies were our first love – and then we were seeing how television was becoming so much more cinematic. We started to talk about movies, many of which were from the '80s. We talked about stories that merged the supernatural genre with very relatable human characters. We like human, character-based storytelling, so that's what we decided to do. And then we wrote it and we sent it around.
Matt: After that, Netflix somehow read it and then they bought it. I mean, we were super inexperienced and it was not a slam dunk – but Netflix saw something in it and gave us the green light.

Did you know how you wanted season two to pan out when you finished shooting season one?
Matt: At the end of season one, I feel like you're purposely teeing up a season two and hoping the show will get a chance to live on. We had ideas in terms of where we wanted to take the story. We wanted to see the repercussions of what happened to Will. Are there side effects from living in this alternate dimension? We're dealing with that in season two. We're dealing with Barb. We're dealing with the mystery of what happened to her, too. We jump into that stuff pretty much right away in episode one.

Do you have any ideas about how the show will eventually end? Is there a long-term plan for *Stranger Things*?
Matt: We kind of have an end goal in mind. We don't see it going on for six, seven seasons. Seven seasons seems pretty crazy! I would pass out. I've seen that happen, where things go on past their expiration date. We really want to end it when people are still wanting more. We want to end it before people are tired of it.

How much pressure did you face in creating the second season?
Matt: The pressure feels about even with season one, because when we were writing the first season, we were terrified that no one would like it or watch it. Now we know people are going to watch it, so we don't have that concern anymore – but then that's replaced by this new pressure. At the end of the day, we always think about what we would want to see. We think, "Let's make this for ourselves, and fingers crossed we connect with other people." It's our hope that other people will want to see this, too. Luckily, that's worked out so far – but it's hard for us to know until it comes out.
Ross: Our strength is that we now know these characters and these actors and we know what they can do. We know what the boys can do, so now we just keep writing for them.

In general, what's your take on sequels?
Matt: With sequels, there are often more misses than hits – but I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that they are trying too hard to recreate the first experience. It's like they almost mimic it. What we're trying to do here is almost like when James Cameron does a sequel. He does it and he tells a very different story. He sets the same mood and tone, but then he moves it in a different direction. That's something that was really important to us. I'm sure some people will like it less than season one and some people will like it more. Regardless, there will be arguments about it and that's fine.

What inspires the monsters and the horror of *Stranger Things*?
Matt: We started getting into horror movies when we were in the eighth grade. Then we discovered Sam Raimi and *The Evil Dead*. We discovered John Carpenter and Wes Craven, too. Somehow, we've been obsessed with that dark material. What I like about the show is the fact that you can have a monster and it doesn't just appeal to people who like horror. I know that horror fans are watching the show, and I like that. But I get the sense that a lot of people are watching *Stranger Things* who don't necessarily watch horror movies – and I also like that. In that sense, *Stranger Things* is much more like a Stephen King book. You hear the name, Stephen King, but when you actually sit down and read one of his books, it's 90% about characters. His dialogue is beautiful and you fall in love with these characters. And, yeah, there are monsters in the story – but that's fine.

What can you tell us about the directors of season two?
Matt: We're doing the first two and the last two episodes, so we're starting the story. Shawn Levy did three and four last year, so it makes sense that it would be the same this year. He's amazing. He's been with the show since the beginning. He knows it so, so well. He's part of the family. And Andrew Stanton was not part of the family, but he is now.

Getting a little bit of tunnel vision.

A REAL PAIN

"When *Stranger Things* first came out, we were forced to watch it at a friend's house," admitted Matt Duffer, recalling his first viewing of the series. "It was just painful. You could see everything that's wrong with it and you just want to do better." Thankfully, the second season was officially greenlit on 31 August 2016. "The fact that people are watching gives you an opportunity to get to bat again."

Things are heating up on set.

The Duffers didn't even show up in costume.

Don't mistake those proton packs for leaf blowers.

Joyce and Hopper scrub up well.

"We like human, character-based storytelling, so that's what we decided to do"

Andrew was a fan of the show. He reached out and said, "I want to direct some episodes." I didn't know him, but we learned how to write scripts from watching *Toy Story* about 20 to 30 times because it's the perfect script, so we were excited to have him on board. Andrew was one of the main writers of *Toy Story*, so we really look up to him and his style is a good match for the show.

How do you choose your collaborators?
Matt: We like to bring in people who are young and super passionate and talented, but don't necessarily have a lot of experience. We like to open doors for people in that way. And then we also want to collaborate with people who we look up to; whose work we like. Andrew falls into the second category, and the hope is that we learn stuff from Andrew, which we do.

What films do you recommend fans watch in preparation for season two?
Matt: One of our hopes is that if a 10-year-old watches the show and they haven't seen some of these '80s classics that we were inspired by, then that will be the first thing they're going to watch afterwards. There's *Karate Kid* and *Temple Of Doom*, and so many more. If they're in high school or older, they should watch *The Evil Dead*, *Halloween* and *Poltergeist* specifically for this season. But if you want to binge on something, then I would read Stephen King books. *Stranger Things* is like the cinematic version of reading a book. You can pick it up and put it down whenever you want – or you can fly through a book just like you fly through the show. Stephen King books like *The Stand* have a lot of the same feeling. That would be my recommendation.

The fifth and final season of Stranger Things will be released on Netflix in three parts. Part one on 26 November, part two on 25 December and part three on 31 December.

ALL QUOTES AND INTERVIEWS FROM THIS RETROSPECTIVE ARTICLE ARE FROM 2016 AND 2017.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

SIERRA GREER

A life of one's own: the story behind this year's Clarke Award winner

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Dittmeier

WHEN AMERICAN NOVELIST SIERRA Greer was nominated for the 2025 Arthur C Clarke Award, there was never a chance that she wouldn't make it to London for the ceremony to announce the winner. "I was talking to my husband," she remembers. "He said, 'We're going, right?' And I was like, 'Oh yeah, we're going!' I mean it's such an honour, it really is."

Even so, Greer says she was utterly caught by surprise when *Annie Bot*, a tale of a "Cuddle Bunny" female robot and her relationship with her owner, was announced as the winner of an award that has become SF's equivalent to lit-fic's Booker Prize. "Honestly, I was there in the room and I was waiting to hear who else was going to win the award, curious to see who would win because I had been reading the other books," she says. When her name was announced, "I wasn't even sure I'd heard them properly." She modestly goes out of her way to emphasise how many people, from her editors to her readers, helped with the book's success.

In truth, she shouldn't have been surprised. *Annie Bot* is a superb novel, a study of a toxic relationship that, in key respects, belongs in a tradition of feminist SF that extends back past the first Clarke winner, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, to the work of Ursula K Le Guin and proto-SF texts such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

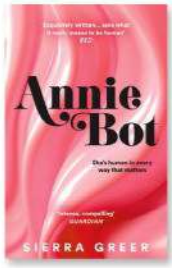
It was a novel, says Greer, that began life after Annie was a "peripheral figure" in a short story. This was at a time when Greer, a former teacher, was known for her YA work. A friend suggested the story could be expanded, but Greer thought it was a "capsule story", complete in and of itself. Besides, Greer was still thinking of robots as "like C-3PO from *Star Wars*". That changed when Greer realised she could write about a robot that was more akin to a human.

ANNIE ANXIETY

"That's when Annie started to emerge," she says, "And I realised that it was really pivotal, the relationship she was in, to how she was going to develop. So then I had this dynamic between her and [her "owner"] Doug, and that's what I really wanted to explore."

Greer began writing. Not someone who plans the story but rather writes to discover what will happen, she began with a scene of Annie and Doug in the bedroom and went from there. What emerged was a claustrophobic novel that's often deeply disturbing. "I was writing during the pandemic," she says, "so the claustrophobia I felt, I think, is reflected in the novel." It's Annie who essentially shows us her world, that of a sex robot who wants to please Doug. The book is filled with compellingly odd details, such as the way Annie – who looks human – warms up her core temperature before sex.

"There are certainly scenes that were really shocking and difficult for me to write," says Greer. This isn't because Doug is physically violent, but because the book is a study of "controlling abuse". Doug is a lonely man on the edge of becoming permanently embittered following a failed marriage. He sees Annie as his property, as akin to a toaster. If you were dating Doug, adds Greer, "it would take a while" for you to realise what he was like. "That seems to hit a lot of nerves for people when they're reading," she says.



BIODATA

From **Saint Paul, Minnesota**

Greatest Hits
Under the name Caragh O'Brien, Greer has written two YA trilogies: Birthmarked (2010-12) and Vault Of Dreamers (2016-17).

Random Fact
Greer is the middle child of seven, "a riotous bunch". She says her childhood was one of games, musicals and "reading of all the time".

BREAKING BAD

Yet Doug, despite the fact that he "does absolutely horrible things", is never allowed to become a two-dimensional baddie. "I would say he's a really broken person," says Greer, "so he has a lot of opportunity to heal over the course of the book. He makes some drastic mistakes and does some backsliding, but he also reaches a bottom-out point where he realises he has to go get some therapy."

Greer says that she could imagine women buying sex robots, but that the novel would have been "a completely different story" had she reversed the sexes of her characters. And anyway, who knows whether that approach would work? *Annie Bot*, after all, is a story that gains weight and power from reflecting contemporary debates about the patriarchy, the rise of incel subculture and the trad-wife movement.

It's also worth emphasising that, though much of the book is about Annie trying to please Doug, this is her "origin story", the tale of someone striving to become the person she wants and needs to be. "She felt both deeply familiar to me and also *other*," says Greer of trying to imagine how a robot going through such a process might see the world. "She becomes Annie Bot," Greer adds of Annie's development. "She becomes somebody who's not human, but is complete to herself."

So what's next for Greer? She says that she started working on another novel, but it didn't really go anywhere. However, she saved some elements of the book, and two drafts in, she's waiting to discover where it will land. She doesn't seem too worried by this. "Every morning, my job is to get up and write," she says. "That's the only thing in my control, right? So that's what I do."

Annie Bot is published by The Borough Press.

> “There are scenes that were shocking and difficult for me to write”

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MAGAZINESDIRECT.COM/WEDNESDAY

SEPTEMBER 2025

Reviews

edited by Ian Berriman

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First family, fifth film

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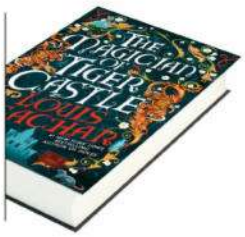

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THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS

A world of their own

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 114 minutes

Director **Matt Shakman**

Cast **Pedro Pascal, Vanessa Kirby, Ebon Moss-Bachrach, Joseph Quinn**

There's an irony at the heart of this movie so powerful it must have been bombarded by cosmic rays. *Fantastic Four* issue one launched a comic-book universe in 1961 but only now, in the 37th entry of a sprawling cinematic saga, is that founding family finally embraced by Marvel Studios. Late to your own party, much?

The FF debut here in a standalone reality, a smart creative choice that not only frees the film from a lore-drenched MCU but allows it to celebrate the era that birthed the comic. If the other Marvel movies took us to Earth-616 then this is Earth-Hey, the '60s! (All right, Earth-828, if we're taking notes.) Witty art direction conjures a gloriously immersive vintage future, all bubble cars and Googie architecture, gleaming with Apollo-age optimism. This is, you suspect, a universe where Lee Harvey Oswald *missed*.

If the swingin' bachelor-pad trimmings are more *The Jetsons* than Jack Kirby then main threat Galactus perfectly channels the pop-art genius of the FF's co-creator. Brought to the big screen as a risible cloud in Fox's *Fantastic Four: Rise Of The Silver Surfer* (2007), the legendary devourer of worlds is now thrillingly true to Kirby's vision. His entry is spine-tingling: half-glimpsed, mind-breakingly colossal, full of sinister majesty. Voiced by Ralph Ineson like God on a bad day, the planet-guzzler's kaiju-style assault on Manhattan feels ripped from the page.

While the plot takes clear inspiration from Galactus's first appearance in the comics, *First Steps* tweaks and twists the source material. Aside from a gender-swapped Silver Surfer, the absence of a certain deus ex machina from the classic Lee and Kirby tale compels a desperate Reed Richards – and the screenwriters – to think up a fresh way to stave off Armageddon, giving some familiar story beats a welcome shot of unpredictability.

The quartet are in the hands of a talented, engaging cast, even if everyone feels a nudge away from their printed counterparts. Pedro Pascal gives us a gentler, more pensive Reed but ultimately convinces as the FF's noble brainbox (if only the effects made more inventive use of his stretching power). Joseph Quinn's Johnny Storm is distinctly less brattish, while Ebon Moss-Bachrach underplays a soulful Ben Grimm who's oddly reluctant to utter his fabled battle cry. It's Vanessa Kirby – intense, magnetic and *human* – who anchors the whole thing as Sue Storm, facing not just motherhood but a pseudo-biblical moral choice that gives this superheroic spectacle genuine emotional impact.

The obligatory mid-credits sting teases *Avengers: Doomsday*. You feel the gravitational pull of the MCU, and just for a moment it feels like a shame. This is a fun world, which makes a beleaguered movie empire feel new again. Let's stay awhile. **Nick Setchfield**

i The leads from Roger Corman's 1994 *The Fantastic Four* film have cameos: two as TV journalists; two as power-station workers.

THE LIFE OF CHUCK

Three's the charm

★★★★☆

RELEASED 20 AUGUST
15 | 111 minutes
Directors **Mike Flanagan**
Cast **Tom Hiddleston, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Karen Gillan, Mark Hamill**

Having explored the supernatural sides of Stephen King's oeuvre in *Gerald's Game* and *Doctor Sleep*, writer/director Mike Flanagan focuses on his more soulful stylings in this poignant adaptation of the author's 2020 novella.

A three-chaptered tale told in reverse, *The Life Of Chuck* is ostensibly about an accountant whose ordinary existence goes unremarked. As Flanagan rewinds to his adolescence and childhood, though, the film reveals its true colours as an elegant treatise on life itself and how our days on Earth ripple outwards.

Chuck himself, played as an adult by Tom Hiddleston, barely figures in the film's opening segment. Yet his presence is sorely felt by schoolteacher Marty (Chiwetel Ejiofor) and his ex-wife Felicia (Karen Gillan) as they come to terms with a world that appears to be ending.

Could the ecological disasters on the news have anything to do with Charles "Chuck" Krantz, a smiling stranger whose face has become inexplicably ubiquitous in their small town? We'll have to wait for an answer, as Flanagan swiftly pivots to an earlier episode that sees Chuck joyously cutting a rug to a busking drummer's irresistible improvs.

> **"An elegant treatise on how our days on Earth ripple outwards"**

"... Then we put our own hat down and collect 10ps."

It's only when we reach the film's final section – a rite of passage for the younger Chuck (Benjamin Pajak) involving a tragic orphaning, a haunted cupola and a memorable school dance – that we enter more traditional Kingly territory. Yet our patience is amply rewarded, not just by an emotional resolution but also by a delightful supporting turn from Mark Hamill as our hero's curmudgeonly grandfather.

Though the tripartite structure won't delight everyone – indeed, there are times when it feels like we are watching a TV series – this remains a Life to savour.

Neil Smith

ℹ The film is dedicated to Scott Wampler, an American journalist who co-hosted Stephen King podcast *The Kingcast*.

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER

Playing hooky

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 111 minutes
Director **Jennifer Kaytin Robinson**
Cast **Madelyn Cline, Chase Sui Wonders, Jonah Hauer-King**

Though remembered with nostalgia by '90s horror fans, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* isn't a patch on writer Kevin Williamson's other big hit, *Scream*. Arguably it's also more of a whodunnit than a horror film. One thing you could say in favour of this latest revival is that it fixes that. The kills may be pretty bland by slasher standards, but there are many more of them, with a bewildering number of innocent bystanders also buying the farm.

Twenty-eight years on from the "Southport Massacre", we return to the demographically homogeneous coastal town, where another bunch of pretty young things are involved in a fatal car accident (one which, this time, they seem far less culpable for), then hunted down by a hook-wielding killer in a raincoat.

Director/co-writer Jennifer Kaytin Robinson has some fun early on with fake-outs that play with audience expectations. And a nightmare sequence featuring a digitally de-aged Sarah Michelle Gellar – one of three returning old-timers – is a neat touch. (It's certainly a smarter callback than the stage dressing from the "Croaker Queen" pageant, which her character won, inexplicably turning up stored in a *cemetery*...)

> **"The kills may be pretty bland, but there are many of them"**

The cast get a shock when they see *SFX*'s star rating.

Otherwise this is a dud, due to a script which constantly stretches credulity beyond breaking point. Nothing here convinces, from the police cover-up which downplays the murders (where are the press?) to the heroes' inability to tool up or simply leave town. The reveal of who's wearing that slicker – real "throw your Butterkist at the screen" stuff – is the final straw.

Ian Berriman

ℹ SPOILER! Madelyn Cline's Danica won a very last-minute reprieve, with a reshoot in June undoing the character's death.

"Be sure to photograph my good side."

THE TOXIC AVENGER

Solid waste

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 29 AUGUST

18 | 102 minutes

Director **Macon Blair**

Cast **Peter Dinklage, Kevin Bacon, Elijah Wood, Jacob Tremblay, Taylour Paige**

"More slick, just as sick" might have been the mission statement for Macon Blair's reboot of Troma's *Toxic Avenger* series, a movie with higher production values than the 1984 original, but enough decapitation, limb-lopping and disembowelment to scare off most mainstream viewers.

The plot outline and eco-friendly theme remain broadly the same, as Winston Gooze (Peter Dinklage), a janitor at a chemical factory, plunges into a pool of toxic waste and mutates into a misshapen superhero (think Brundlefly meets the Elephant Man) who eviscerates evildoers. Dinklage brings a sadness to the creature that recalls the classic Universal Monster movies, but gore and camp are the main orders of the day. Kevin Bacon lends OTT support as a sleazy CEO obsessed with preserving his youth, and Elijah Wood goes full Igor as his henchman.

It's arguably done too professionally to truly capture the anti-establishment ethos of the original, but deserves kudos for poking fun at the system, and the constant stream of quips and sight gags that spew forth like effluence from a busted sewage pipe. Again, mainstream viewers will be appalled – which is just how loyal fans of this unlikely franchise will want it. **Jamie Graham**

i Back in 2013, Arnold Schwarzenegger was in talks to play a character called the Exterminator in a *Toxic Avenger* revival.

SUPERMAN

To Kal-El and back

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 129 minutes

Director **James Gunn**

Cast **David Corenswet, Rachel Brosnahan, Nicholas Hoult, Edi Gathegi**

He's best known as the Man of Steel, but in the pages of DC comics, Superman was also billed as the Man of Tomorrow. It feels like a heavy mantle right now, given that this is a movie that not only needs to restore the Kryptonian's big-screen fortunes, but also Big Bang a new comic-book universe in an age of so-called superhero fatigue.

Writer/director James Gunn smartly shortcuts the well-worn mythology. Superman's origin story is disposed of in the opening captions – though later revelations about his homeworld may dismay purists – while Clark and Lois's love affair is already a done deal. We're plunged into a primary-coloured, fully formed world, and Gunn's lightness of touch ensures that it never feels cluttered with lore or overstuffed with characters, even if motivations and backstories are conspicuously absent in many cases. For newcomers, it might be disorienting; for longtime comic junkies, it feels like home.

Up against such potential film-stealers as Nathan Fillion's Guy Gardner, scrappy superpooch Krypto and an amusingly deadpan turn by Edi Gathegi as Mr Terrific, David Corenswet gives us perhaps the most human Superman yet: cocky and prickly at times, occasionally a goofball, frequently a bloodied punchbag, but always possessing that crucial Midwestern decency. Rachel Brosnahan brings a flinty charm to Lois, while Nicholas Hoult makes for a fresh-faced but convincingly demonic Luthor. Shame his overwrought meltdowns rather diminish his menace.

This is a witty and breezily entertaining watch, even if a slugfest in a dingy, CGI-slathered "pocket universe" feels like the most exhausting kind of superhero cinema. It's the quieter moments that resonate: Clark's soul-baring talk with his adoptive father; the silent emotional beat after Lois confesses she's no good at relationships. For all the fanboy gags and obligatory city-trashing spectacle, Gunn places a beating heart behind that famous chest symbol.

Nick Setchfield

Leaving the Fortress of Solitude's front door open was a mistake.

i Clark's hypno glasses were first revealed in "The Master Mesmerizer Of Metropolis!" in issue 300 of *Superman* (1978).

FREAKIER FRIDAY

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 111 minutes

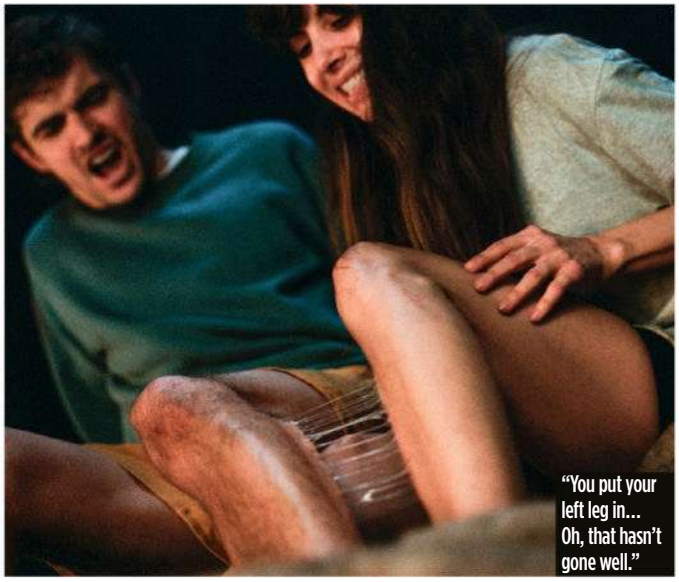
Director **Nisha Ganatra**

Cast **Jamie Lee Curtis, Lindsay Lohan, Julia Butters, Sophia Hammons**

"Let's pause and reframe!" exhorts psychologist Tess Coleman (Jamie Lee Curtis) in an attempt to defuse a family bust-up. That's more or less what Disney have done with this belated sequel to 2003's *Freaky Friday*, which doubles that movie's ante by introducing another generation to its body-swapping high jinks.

In the original – itself a remake of the 1976 Jodie Foster version – some "strange Asian voodoo" saw strait-laced Tess and rebellious daughter Anna (Lindsay Lohan) spend 24 hours in each other's shoes. This time around (PC alert!), it's an eccentric fortune teller (Vanessa Bayer) who's behind a switcheroo that requires Anna to swap bodies with her teenage offspring Harper (Julia Butters), and also has Tess flip physiques with the snobby progeny of the British chef (Manny Jacinto) her daughter is about to marry.

Confused? You will be by Nisha Ganatra's busy comedy, whose central conceit – Lohan (actually Harper) and Curtis (in reality Sophia Hammons's Lily) teaming up to sabotage Anna's big day – freakily resembles that of another Lohan/Disney makeover (1998's *The Parent Trap*) in reverse. Fortunately writer Jordan Weiss is wise enough to recognise this series' greatest asset: the giddy pleasure of watching the 66-year-old Curtis goof about like a petulant adolescent. **Neil Smith**



"You put your left leg in... Oh, that hasn't gone well."

TOGETHER

2 Become 1

★★★½☆

RELEASED 15 AUGUST

15 | 102 minutes

Director **Michael Shanks**

Cast **Dave Franco, Alison Brie, Damon Herriman, Mia Morrissey**

A couple whose relationship has been slowly but steadily falling out of sync being forced to be closer than they might prefer through body horror might not be the subtlest metaphor in the shop, but writer/director Michael Shanks makes it work with a careful drip feed of tension and just enough skewed humour to leaven the gloopy dread.

We're introduced to Tim (a scruffy, mullet-sporting Dave Franco), who's still harbouring rock-star ambitions. He's not so thrilled to be pulling up roots and moving to the countryside with long-time girlfriend Millie (Alison Brie), who has settled into a more practical life as a teacher and is beginning to subtly pull away from her man-child partner. A chance encounter with a mysterious cave leads to some confusing symptoms, not least their bodies being literally drawn to one another.

> **"Franco and Brie make good use of their real-life chemistry"**

Franco and Brie make good use of their real-life married chemistry, infusing a deeper level of feeling into Tim, Millie and the increasingly uncanny narrative than might have been expected. And Shanks keeps things moving along for the most part, only once or twice falling foul of a lessoning of tension.

Once things really start to get physical, there are shades of David Cronenberg's work in the terrifying transformations, and the effects work is (with one or two moments excluded) excellent, convincing and creepy.

The Substance spliced together with a romantic thriller and a touch of comedy? It might not sound like the easiest combination, but here it blends effectively – with possibly the best use of a Spice Girls track you'll hear all year. **James White**

i Franco ended up with a wide variety of bruises after shooting certain scenes, and kept a photo journal of his injuries.

SMURFS

★½☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

U | 92 minutes

The latest big-screen outing for Peyo's blue-hued hat-wearers combines the cartoonery of 2017's *The Lost Village* with the live-action elements of 2011's *The Smurfs* to irksomely tedious effect. But, then, what should we expect from a reboot that casts the divisive James Corden as a sad sack called No Name who, like the film around him, is seeking a reason to exist? Elsewhere, Rihanna plays the latest lone female Smurfette voiced by a slumming-it pop star. **Neil Smith**

SUPER CHARLIE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 15 AUGUST

PG | 82 minutes

An enjoyable adaptation of a Swedish children's book about a baby with superpowers.

When Charlie is born, 10-year-old brother Wille discovers the sprog's abilities and sets out to track down some robbers. Fun is had with Charlie's zaps and kapows, and Wille's journey from jealous sibling to loving big brother is sweet. Okay, so the dubbing sometimes clunks and the animation's fairly basic, but the odd genuine giggle helps to paper over the cracks. **Jayne Nelson**

THE SANDMAN Season Two

Don't Dream, it's over

★★★½☆

- UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
- Showrunner **Allan Heinberg**
- Cast **Tom Sturridge, Esmé Creed-Miles, Barry Sloane, Jenna Coleman, Freddie Fox, Vivienne Acheampong**

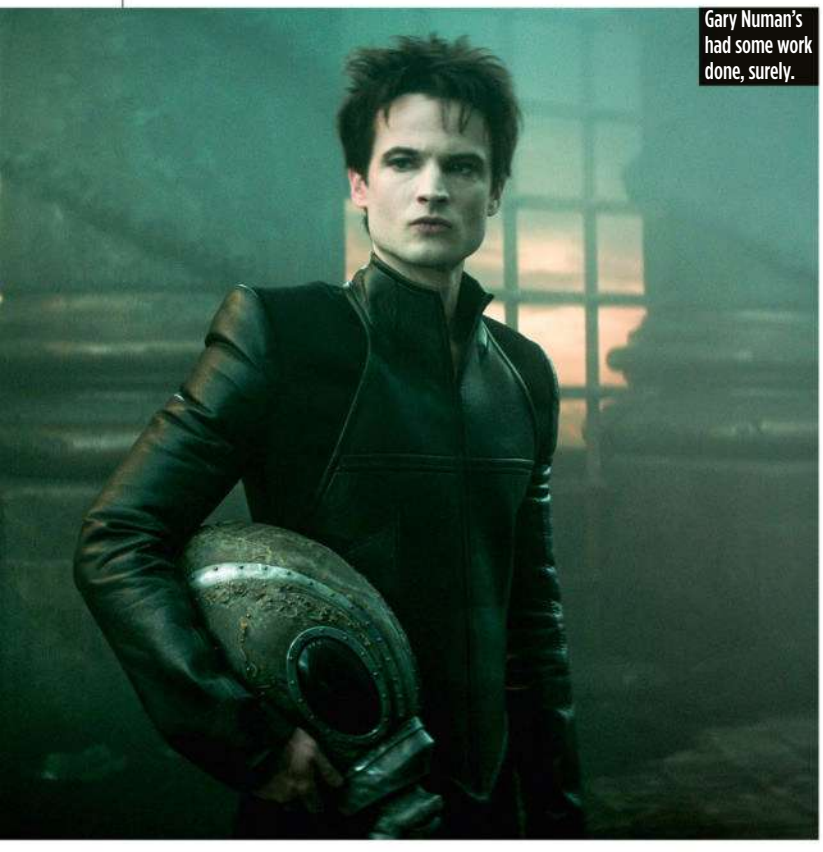
EPISODES 2.01-2.12 ***The Sandman's*** first season was a hit for Netflix in 2022, but due to the vagaries of streaming economics a second run was never a sure thing. It was eventually commissioned on the basis that it would bring the fantasy epic to an early close with its 22nd episode (the original comic ran for 75 issues).

Because of that, this often impressive – and sometimes wildly frustrating – series can't help but feel like a speed run of the saga's best bits. (A bonus special adapting the graphic novel *Death: The High Cost Of Living* was not available at the time of review.)

Season two picks up with Dream/Morpheus (Tom Sturridge – fantastic, a voice like a tombstone dropping, able to invest this difficult character with a complex internal life) back in his kingdom. A meeting with the rest of the Endless, however, goes badly. Consumed with guilt over banishing his lover Nada (Umulisa Gahiga) to Hell for millennia, he pledges to set her free.

That sets him on a collision course with Lucifer (Gwendoline Christie), and then onto a quest to find his missing brother Destruction (Barry Sloane) and a fateful encounter with Dream's estranged son Orpheus (Ruairi O'Connor) – now reduced to an immortal head on a plinth.

> **"Unfortunately, it gets off to a rough start"**



Gary Numan's had some work done, surely.

It's epic stuff, and when it works it reminds you just how evocative the comic's patchwork approach to mythology was. Unfortunately, it gets off to a rough start. "Season Of Mists" opens the season with a dull scene of the Endless bickering that somehow runs for a full *16 minutes*.

A similar gathering of the gods in "More Devils Than Vast Hell Can Hold" feels more like a squabble between a group of self-important cosplayers than a mythic meeting between demons, deities and divinities – though Freddie Fox's Loki is a charmingly malevolent addition to the cast.

Plus, for a show that's meant to convey the vastness of the human imagination it often looks oddly drab; you suspect there may have been a budget cut somewhere along the way.

Happily, things improve with "Brief Lives". Wanda is a beloved and groudbreaking comics character, and while she has a reduced role here, Indya Moore is excellent in the part. A haunting meeting with the distant, lordly parents of the Endless in "Time And Night" provides the season with its standout episode.

As Dream draws the ire of the all-powerful Kindly Ones, the show takes on a more elegiac tone. This is a season about Morpheus reckoning with the harm that he has caused the people in his life and confronting the strong likelihood of his own looming end. It delivers a conclusion sufficiently rich with emotion that it's easy to forgive this messily ambitious adaptation for most of its indulgences. **Will Salmon**

ℹ "Time And Night" is inspired by 2015 prequel *The Sandman: Overture*, rather than the main comic, which ended in 1996.

EYES OF WAKANDA

★★★☆☆

- UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**
- Creator **Todd Harris**
- Cast **Winnie Harlow, Cress Williams, Patricia Belcher, Larry Herron**

EPISODES 1.01-1.04 **This animated** anthology series spins out of the MCU's *Black Panther* movie and its sequel. Each episode takes place in a different period of Wakandan history and follows the exploits of the War Dogs – a group of spies tasked with locating stolen artefacts and technology.

The first episode introduces us to Noni (Winnie Harlow), a former member of the Dora Milaje, now tasked with bringing down a rogue general. Episode two takes place in the Trojan War and follows Achilles and Memnon – the latter a secret Wakandan operative.

The third part takes place in China, 1400, and has a similar plot – though this time the two leads are lovers with conflicting agendas. Finally, "The Last Panther" is set in Ethiopia, 1896, and sees a young Wakandan prince cross paths with a Black Panther from the future.

Attractively animated with dynamic action sequences, there's plenty to admire in *Eyes Of Wakanda*. That said, while the stories are all entertaining – the tragic second episode being a notable highlight – the "retrieve the artefact" format is repetitious. And at just four episodes the season feels over before it's really started. This leaves *Eyes Of Wakanda* feeling slight, like a proof of concept for something larger that may or may not come to fruition. **Will Salmon**

LEVIATHAN

A whale of a time

★★★½☆

UK/US: **Netflix, streaming now**

Director **Christophe Ferreira**

Cast **Natsumi Fujiwara, Ayumu Murase, Shunsuke Sakuya, Hiroki Touchi**

EPISODES 1.01-1.12 **This animated** steampunk adventure, based on a YA series by Scott Westerfeld, is not always as lively as it should be, but builds to an enjoyable finale full of outlandish war machines and apocalyptic threats.

In an alternate-history First World War, some nations (including Germany) use giant fighting vessels, while others (including the UK) favour genetically-engineered creatures such as flying whales. Alek is the highborn son of the Austro-Hungarian archduke whose assassination triggered the war. While Alek is being evacuated, he encounters a crashed whale in the snowy mountains. Its crew includes an impudent Scottish youth called Dylan, actually a disguised girl who's thirsting for adventure.

The first two episodes start the adventure strongly, but it flags for a while after that, lacking tension and urgency. But the story picks up again in the show's second half with a cheekily unexpected love triangle and trips to Siberia and a Fritz Lang-style New York.

The CG animation is puppet-like at times, never rivalling Netflix's *Arcane*, but the movement's often nimble and appealing. And while *Leviathan*'s the work of an anime studio, it has none of the lewdness and excessive violence often linked with that form. **Andrew Osmond**

i The series adapts all three of Westerfeld's books. Keith Thompson, their illustrator, was part of the team.

CREATURE COMMANDOS Season One

The Monster Squad

★★★½☆

UK **NOW, streaming now**

US **HBO Max, streaming now**

Creator **James Gunn**

Cast **Indira Varma, Alan Tudyk, David Harbour, Sean Gunn**

EPISODES 1.01-1.07 **The new James** Gunn-led DC Cinematic Universe may have only just kicked off at the cinema with *Superman*, but its real first chapter was this adult animation, released in the US last December and now *finally* available to stream in the UK.

Based on a semi-obscure DC superteam from the '80s, the Creature Commandos are a squad of monstrous anti-heroes. This incarnation is made up of the Bride of Frankenstein (voiced by Indira Varma), a psychotic World War II battle droid known as GI Robot (Sean Gunn), Weasel (Gunn again) from The Suicide Squad, a radioactive skeleton called Doctor Phosphorus (Alan Tudyk) and fish woman Nina Mazursky (Zoë Chao). Led by Rick Flag Sr (Frank Grillo), the commandos are despatched to Pokolistan, which is under attack by the evil witch Circe (Anya Chalotra). Meanwhile, Frankenstein's monster – but call him Eric – learns of the Bride's presence and sets out to find her.

Gunn's *Superman* won many over with its old-school charm and optimism, but this is an altogether different beast. It's far more violent, blood-soaked and sweary, closer to *Peacemaker*. It has plenty of good gags and some inventive action, but the more extreme elements do sometimes feel more edgelord-y and adolescent than actually adult.

That's not to say the series doesn't have its highs. Each episode delves deeper into one of the characters; the standout, "Chasing Squirrels", explores Weasel's tragic backstory and is a real tearjerker. The Bride, too, is given a strong arc as she fights for her freedom from obsessive Eric.

Creature Commandos was perhaps an odd choice to kick this brave new DCU off with, but it's singularly Gunn, and adventurous enough that its already-in-the-works second season feels well deserved. **Will Salmon**

i The theme tune is an instrumental of "Moliendo Café", a Venezuelan song from 1958. Gunn came across it on Spotify.

THE CANNIBAL MAN

In the soup

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1972 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Eloy de la Iglesia**

Cast **Vicente Parra, Emma Cohen, Eusebio Poncela, Charly Bravo**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **One of the titles** on the "video nasty list" that was actually prosecuted, this Spanish horror defies expectations.

The title's misleading, for a start. Though the protagonist does put corpses into the human food chain via a soup factory shredder, he doesn't eat them himself. The most wince-inducing scene here is a sequence of cattle having their throats slit.

It also often seems more like a black comedy. It's hard to think of a serial killer more hapless than Marcos (Vicente Parra). His first kill is accidental, every subsequent victim a link in the chain of his desperate cover-up. The bodies stack up faster than he can dispose of them, one sports bag load at a time. After a while, you guffaw whenever there's a knock at the door, knowing Marcos will soon be frantically spraying air freshener around again...

But the most surprising element is his relationship with his male neighbour. You fully expect Néstor (Eusebio Poncela) to end up in a tin. Instead, there's homoerotic night-swimming and a touching scene where Marcos's many transgressions are forgiven. And this isn't a case of imposing a modern interpretation: the subtext is absolutely deliberate – and doubly remarkable for a film made under General Franco's fascist dictatorship.

Extras Three academic talking heads (17/12/12 minutes) place the film in the context of '70s Spain and the nasties panic. There's a concerted effort here to rehabilitate the film, described as "textually rich", with "profound poetic meaning". This seems like overcompensating.

This 88 Films release offers both the International Cut (98 minutes) and an Extended Cut (107 minutes). You'll spot major additions, as the film switches from an English dub to Spanish. Mostly showing how Marcos came to be in charge of that shredder, they're only of mild interest.

Three brief deleted scenes (presented mute) include some same-sex snogging. There are also two critical commentaries on the International Cut; both a tad waffly. Plus: trailers. **Ian Berriman**

"I only said that maybe you could use a Britta filter."

i The Spanish title was *La Semana Del Asesino* (Week Of The Killer); a US one was *The Apartment On The 13th Floor*.

NEITHER THE SEA NOR THE SAND

True love never dies

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1972 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Fred Burnley**

Cast **Susan Hampshire, Frank Finlay, Michael Petrovitch, Michael Craze**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **An idiosyncratic** take on the undead, this slow-burning romantic tragedy from British studio Tigon has an unexpected source: a novel by Gordon Honeycombe, an ITV newscaster in the '70s. Echoing WW Jacobs's "The Monkey's Paw", it's a careful-what-you-wish-for tale of resurrection.

Susan Hampshire plays the unhappily married Anna, who on a trip to Jersey falls head over heels for Hugh (Michael Petrovitch), a Byronic type given to statements like "reality is total". Just as love is blossoming, Hugh drops dead of a brain haemorrhage. But next morning he's back, albeit mute (though able to communicate psychically...), impassively staring and slowly decaying.

Anna's denial sees her continue to pursue a physical love life, which provides a shiver of taboo. Frank Finlay adds quirk as Hugh's brother, whose prissy manner and profession (antiques dealer) aren't hard to decode... And the film renders the windswept, rocky shoreline around the causeway to the La Corbière lighthouse into an bleak supernatural landscape.

Extras The highlight of this 88 Films release is a talking head by Stephen Thrower, who's really done his research – down to identifying a newspaper edition and digging out credits for the director which aren't on IMDb.

Short interviews with (in descending order of interest) Hampshire (nine minutes), the editor (11 minutes) and a props man (eight minutes), reveal that the actress had a body double, and that crew and hotel staff played football – a photo of their teams is a charming inclusion.

Two critical commentaries (John Hamilton and Jasper Sharp/Kim Newman and Barry Forshaw) usefully delve into deviations from the novel (something that Thrower doesn't address). Plus: gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

Peg on the nose, problem sorted.

i Director Fred Burnley died three years later after inhaling guano dust while filming in a cave in South America.

PERPETRATOR

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 18 AUGUST
2023 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **Jennifer Reeder**
Cast **Kiah McKirnan, Melanie Liburd, Ireon Roach**

If you've seen *Saint Clare* (reviewed last issue), *Perpetrator* may ring bells, as it also centres on a string of kidnappings of young women facilitated by authority figures. Funny how such trends emerge.

Schoolgirl burglar Jonny (Kiah McKirnan) is about to turn 18. She's sent to stay with her great aunt (Alicia Silverstone), who explains the "gift" women of the family develop on entering adulthood: a turbo-charged empathy known as "Forevering".

The film drifts along in aimless, incomprehensible fashion for much of the duration, and you'll need to be a dedicated fan of camp to tolerate the arch performance style. Though the odd quirky detail, like a novelty duck-shaped phone, amuses, the weirdness – which includes blood-drenched school shooting drills – piles up without amounting to much.

On the plus side, the hair and make-up team smash it: McKirnan's 'do is done up differently in nearly every scene, and they all look *fab*.

Extras Writer/director Jennifer Reeder and DoP Sevdije Kastrati provide commentary. A visual essay offers 11 minutes of blather about the use of mirrors as "a metaphorical extension of the womb". Two shorts (10/four minutes) are free of dialogue or plot. Plus: cast interviews (22 minutes); trailer; three music videos; booklet. **Calvin Baxter**

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THE GREEN SLIME

Goo Go Amok

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★☆☆☆☆

RELEASED 1 SEPTEMBER
1968 | 12 | Blu-ray
Director **Kinji Fukasaku**
Cast **Robert Horton, Luciana Paluzzi, Richard Jaeckel, Bud Widom**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Prolific Japanese** director Kinji Fukasaku first came to the attention of most Western viewers thanks to one of his final films: *Battle Royale*. But connoisseurs of kitsch knew his name long before.

Shot at Tokyo's Toei studios, but featuring an entirely Western cast, this goofy base-under-siege tale begins like *Armageddon*, as a team is assembled to blow up an asteroid heading for Earth. Mission accomplished, they return to a spacestation unwittingly bringing some of the titular gunk with them.

It rapidly spawns a monster, which just as rapidly replicates. The creatures' life cycle brings *Alien* to mind (especially since it's inadvisable to shoot them) – though we wouldn't be so foolish as to suggest Dan O'Bannon was taking notes...

The screenplay (partly the work of Batman co-creator Bill Finger) is pure corn, with the mission leader (*Wagon Train*'s Robert Horton) and spacestation commander (Richard Jaeckel, fresh from *The Dirty Dozen*) forever butting heads like stags. Naturally, both have feelings for the same woman (*Thunderball*'s Luciana Paluzzi), who's also on-board.

You'll feel like hitting fast-forward on this human drama to get to the good stuff: the garishly silly alien threat. As hordes of rubbery monsters rush down corridors, flailing their overly long arms about and "mewling" (as the subtitles put it) like Sooty's pal Sweep, we challenge you not to hoot with delight.

Add lashings of sub-*Thunderbirds*-style model work, a party scene with futuristic twisting, and a theme song groovy enough to have been covered by garage rock revivalists The Fuzztones, and you have a real guilty pleasure.

Extras This is a Warner Archive Collection release, so a trailer's your lot. Bah. **Ian Berriman**

i Kinji Fukasaku later said that he saw the conflict between the humans and the aliens as a metaphor for the Vietnam War.

DEVIL FETUS

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 25 AUGUST
1983 | 18 | Blu-ray
Director **Lau Hung-Chuen**
Cast **Shirley Lui, Eddie Chen**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **A foetus only** makes a brief appearance in this crudely hewn Hong Kong horror, but that's way down the list of confusing things about it.

The purchase of a phallic jade vase begins a chain of events which sees a woman screwed by a slimy green demon, then killed in a cat attack, only for the evil spirit to reincarnate 12 years later, possessing first a dog and then her nephew.

Such a synopsis doesn't really give you a full sense of the madness, though. So let's try listing a few elements: a man tearing flesh off his face; a birthday cake full of worms; said nephew putting on make-up and a wig, then masturbating over pin-ups; and (our highlight) a death-by-sauna sequence in which a chap's crushed to a pulp when the walls close in.

Throw this many things at the wall and some will stick, but making sense of how it all fits together is made trickier by how much the plot leans into Chinese cultural traditions surrounding death, and a soundtrack that's a distracting patchwork. We heard some Brian Eno; apparently Vangelis and Ennio Morricone feature too. Best have Shazam cued up.

Extras East Asian cinema expert David West's commentary is instructive on topics such as the Hungry Ghost Festival, Taoist funerals and kendo. Plus: six seconds of alternate shots; gallery; trailer; postcard; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

No-one's stealing laundry off *this* line.

40 ACRES

No-animals Farm

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

2025 | 15 | Digital

Director **RT Thorne**

Cast **Danielle Deadwyler, Michael Greyeyes, Kataem O'Connor, Milcania Diaz-Rojas**

RT Thorne's debut feature arrived with little fanfare across the pond, dumped with minimal promotion. It's a shame, since *40 Acres* deserves some attention.

A post-apocalyptic story where a fungal virus has led to the death of most animals, a critical food shortage and civil war, it's set at a time when farmland is at a premium. Former soldier Hailey Freeman (Danielle Deadwyler) runs her family's property and her blended family with military precision, only for a new threat to unravel her meticulous preparation. Deadwyler is suitably steely and intense, but also finds moments of grace and humanity, while as her husband Galen, Michael Greyeyes matches her beat for beat.

Thorne brings drive and style to the film, which charts familiar territory of man's inhumanity to man as desperate times bite. There are shades of both *The Walking Dead* and *The Last Of Us* (minus the supernatural elements). Gore is staged and deployed effectively and with emotional impact, while the other members of the family unit are as solid as their parents.

The atmosphere of dread and danger is leavened with welcome, believable bonding between the characters, while the action is well-realised and propulsive. Seek this one out. **James White**

ℹ The title plays on the American Civil War order allotting "forty acres and a mule" to formerly enslaved families.

FROM HELL IT CAME

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★☆☆☆☆

RELEASED **1 SEPTEMBER**

1957 | PG | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Who's afraid of** the bark? This shonky drive-in horror finds a South Seas island stalked by a tree creature named Tabonga, reincarnated spirit of a murdered prince.

There's obvious kitsch appeal in the straight-faced, Tiki-flavoured clichés, complete with quicksand, geographically confused voodoo and cat-fights between native girls. But flat direction in unforgiving daylight does the lumbering wooden monster no favours; creepy design, but all the menace of a marauding fence.

Extras Trailer. **Nick Setchfield**

THE OCCUPANT

★★★½☆

RELEASED **1 SEPTEMBER**

2025 | 15 | Digital

As much a spiritual quest as a spirit-testing survival thriller, Hugo Keijzer's debut feature takes us to the Russian border, where geologist Abby (*Resident Evil*'s Ella Balinska) endures high strangeness in a harsh environment after a helicopter crash strands her on the ice.

There's an impressive eye for the stark power of the landscape, while Balinska's naturalistic performance grounds the unfolding mystery. A trippy climax lurches full-tilt into the metaphysical but wisely ringfences space for the imagination. **Nick Setchfield**

THE HOME

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED **22 AUG/29 SEPT**

2025 |18 | Digital / Blu-ray/DVD

There's one great moment in this idiotic intergenerational horror, a jump scare. Troubled twentysomething Max (Pete Davidson) is sentenced to community service at an old folks' home. On his first day he opens a cupboard to find... well, we won't spoil it, but it's good.

Beyond that, the film's a mess. It wants to say something about the way older generations prey on the young, but lacks conviction – the ending feels like the last resort of someone who's written themselves into too many corners.

Extras None. **Sarah Dobbs**

RED SONJA

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED **18 AUG/1 SEPT**

2025 | 15 | Digital / Blu-ray/DVD

40 years after the Brigitte Nielsen flop, we return to the Hyborian Age, sans Conan. After raiders massacre her tribe, Sonja (Matilda Lutz) leads a gladiator rebellion. Familiar TV faces such as Robert Sheehan and Luke Pasqualino do their best with a hokey scrip, but Sonja herself loiters somewhere between anxious befuddlement and angry befuddlement.

Director MJ Bassett's *Solomon Kane* was dour; this has a lighter, vibrant energy. It's codswallop – but marginally better than the 1985 version.

Extras None. **Dave Bradley**

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DEADSTREAM

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★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 1 SEPTEMBER

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray

Directors **Vanessa Winter, Joseph Winter**

Cast **Joseph Winter, Melanie Stone, Jason K Wixom**

Centred on a guy spending a night in a haunted house... no, wait, come back! That may be the most flogged-to-death horror concept of the last decade, but while this low-budget, made-in-Utah Shudder Original isn't wildly original, it has enough brio to entertain you for the duration.

Co-director Joseph Winter is vlogger Shawn, whose latest livestream is a desperate attempt to revive a career that's gone off the rails. Head-mounted GoPro creates a first-person-shooter vibe, accentuated whenever he adds an item to his inventory – like the key to unlock a box. Starting with bumps in the night, it eventually goes Sam Raimi, with rough-around-the-edges physical effects sure to delight fans of '80s horror.

As a satire of the YouTuber phenomenon it's fairly shallow, and Winter only just stays on the bearable side of irritating. But the use of viewer comments to flag things the hero hasn't noticed is neat, and the sense that this was a labour of love really comes across.

Extras Budding filmmaker? Then even if you have no love for found-footage horror it might be worth buying this Arrow Video release, as the behind-the-scenes story is arguably more interesting than what unfolds on screen.

A four-person commentary discusses logistical headaches, like the derelict house – piled with dirt and plagued with trespassers. The directors also talk over rehearsal footage shot during daylight to calculate pacing (18 minutes). The DOP provides a show and tell on his equipment (11 minutes); gotta love their video village – a bit of pegboard with iPads hanging on it! Two sound designers (20 minutes) thoughtfully discuss achieving authenticity; the make-up effects run through the gags (14 minutes). The enthusiasm and can-do spirit on display here is quite touching.

Plus: on-set glimpses (12 minutes); the crew talking spooky incidents on-set (six minutes); a blooper reel; footage of a prank played on intruders; eight deleted/extended scenes; directors' intro; a brief, shrug-worthy short; some pointless "cam footage"; trailers; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

"I knew I shouldn't have burst that zit."

i The rig Shawn wears was made from pieces of PVC pipe and the harness from a baby's car seat.

THE INNKEEPERS

Doom at the inn

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 25 AUGUST

2011 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Ti West**

Cast **Sara Paxton, Pat Healy, Kelly McGillis, George Riddle**

Another of Ti West's early features gets the deluxe 4K treatment. *The Innkeepers* is less obviously a pastiche of '70s movies in the same vein as 2009's *The House Of The Devil*, but there's a charmingly old-fashioned quality to this claustrophobic ghost story nonetheless.

Claire (Sara Paxton) and Luke (Pat Healy) both work at the Yankee Pedlar Inn, a gloomy Connecticut hotel in its final week of operations. They're also ghost hunters, keen to prove the reports of paranormal activity in the building. They get rather more than they bargained for...

The Innkeepers takes its time to build up a mood, opting for slow burn creepiness while also focusing on the dynamic between its leads. There's plenty of charm in Claire and Luke's banter, which makes the film's inevitable dark turn more potent. If not a particularly scary film, it is at least a likeable one.

Extras The Second Sight edition is (as standard) packed with new interviews, though only Healy (30 minutes) represents the cast. Ti West (15 minutes) gives a good overview of making the film; it turns out that the Yankee Pedlar Inn was a real (now defunct) hotel, which West and his crew stayed in while making *The House Of The Devil*. The weird atmosphere of the place led to him writing the script. There are also chats with producer Larry Fessenden (31 minutes), director of photography Eliot Rockett (10 minutes), composer Jeff Grace (eight minutes), and line producer Jacob Jaffke (14 minutes).

Carried over from the old Blu-ray are two audio commentaries, both featuring Ti West. The first track also includes Fessenden and producer Peter Phok, along with sound designer Graham Reznick, and goes into the more technical aspects of making the film. The second, with Paxton and Healy, is lighter and funnier, with the actors' on-screen chemistry coming across clearly again. Plus: a short Making Of (seven minutes); a trailer. The Limited Edition 4K comes with a 120-page book and four art cards. **Will Salmon**

"Pretty sure it's your turn to change the barrel."

i The ghost in the real Yankee Pedlar Inn is said to haunt room 353, where the original owner Alice Conley passed away.

MEANWHILE ON EARTH

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 25 AUGUST
2024 | 15 | Digital
Director **Jérémy Clapin**
Cast **Megan Northam, Dimitri Doré, Sébastien Pouderoux**

How far would you go to bring back a lost loved one?

That's the question facing care-home worker Elsa (Megan Northam) in French writer/director Jérémy Clapin's second feature. Her brother Franck vanished on a space mission. One day, by standing in a particular spot, she establishes a connection with incorporeal beings who offer to return him.

The catch: Elsa must bring five people to the woods, so the aliens can occupy their bodies. Victim one is a guilt-free choice, given that he tries to rape her. From then on in, it gets trickier. Is it okay to sacrifice the elderly? A homeless junkie?

What we have here is a *Star Trek* concept injected into a meditation on grief, filtered through an arthouse lens. (A trip to the woods necessarily entails shots of trees swaying in the wind, close-ups of a snail and a decomposing squirrel, and lashings of lens flare.)

Ultimately this potentially fascinating moral quandary rather fizzles out with a pat message. The main reason to keep viewing is lead Megan Northam, who has a captivating face. It's the sort you might find on the heroine of a Julia Ducournau film: all angles and eye bags; beautiful but pugnacious; a face that could break your heart, or break your nose. It's an expressive instrument, one she shows great command of. **Ian Berriman**

Once a cat rests on your shoulder, you can't move: it's the law.

THE CAT

Pussy weapon

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 25 AUGUST
1992 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **Lam Nai-Choi**
Cast **Christine Ng, Waise Lee, Gloria Yip, Philip Kwok**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Warring aliens make** Hong Kong their battleground in this bonkers sci-fi from the director of Category III favourite *Riki-Oh: The Story Of Ricky*. In one corner: an old man, a young woman and her fluffy black cat. In the other: a protean mash-up of diseased lung and stringy pizza that can spread all over a room, bite people in half, and create possessed "alienoid assassins".

It's a structurally bewildering film, and whether the cat is an alien moggy or an alien that's taken feline form is just one question left hanging. Others include why artefacts called Octagons (essential weapons for defeating the invading monster) are on Earth in museums and, er, why they're not *octagonal*.

For horror fans of a certain vintage, *The Cat* may bring to mind the work of Brian Yuzna and Stuart Gordon; the physical effects are so OTT it wouldn't be a surprise if the name Screaming Mad George scrolled up at the end.

Three or four eye-popping sequences make the viewing experience worthwhile, including a preposterous cat-vs-dog fight choreographed like wire-fu, and scenes of slow-mo machine-gun carnage so hyperbolic they make *The Terminator* look like tea at the vicarage. Eccentric subtitling (which includes phrases like "you silly goose") adds further chuckles.

Extras A Japanese-language version with a different director, a different script and an *almost* entirely different cast was shot simultaneously. It's included here, making this 88 Films release a two-for-one deal – though be aware that it's in blurry SD, with burnt-in Japanese subtitles.

In a 22-minute interview, writer Gordon Chan confesses he has "no method" (that figures...), and lets slip that "a few cats died". A commentary by 88 regular Frank Djeng is informative on the source novel, and very helpful on cultural context. Plus: stills; trailer; booklet; art card. **Ian Berriman**

i In one scene, there's a brief glimpse of an actor from the Japanese version – presumably they forgot to get that shot!

ROUND UP

This month's "based on a true story" exorcism movie is **THE RITUAL** (Blu-ray/DVD, out now). Al Pacino and Dan Stevens play priests tasked with casting out demons from a young woman in 1920s Iowa. We said: "Nothing remotely unexpected occurs in this *The Exorcist*-indebted chiller... though that doesn't prevent it supplying the occasional jump scare and creepy moment." Bonuses: four featurettes and some gimmicky BuzzFeed interviews. *Black Panther* director Ryan Coogler teams up with Michael B Jordan again for **SINNERS** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD). Set in the Jim Crow-era American South of 1932, it follows twins (both played by Jordan) who open a juke joint, which is then descended upon by a band of vampires. We said: "Triumphs in using genre to examine themes of freedom, fellowship, family, ancestry and evil." A decent bonus spread includes a Making Of and four featurettes (totalling 76 minutes), plus 19 minutes of deleted scenes. In **THUNDERBOLTS*** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), a bunch of Marvel misfits must step up when a secret project to create a superhuman goes pear-shaped, resulting in New York being plunged into darkness. We said: "Finds the right balance between action, humour and genuine warmth... Marvel's biggest winner in quite some time." Extras? Director's commentary; three featurettes (27 minutes); a minute of deleted scenes; gag reel. Finally, the latest TV box sets are **DOCTOR WHO** Season Two (Blu-ray/DVD, 18 August) and **THE BOYS** Season Four (Blu-ray/DVD, 1 September).

THE MAGICIAN OF TIGER CASTLE

A wizard yarn

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

320 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Louis Sachar**

Publisher **Mountain Leopard Press**

The world hasn't been lacking of late for fiction that undercuts fantasy tropes. In particular, the idea of a prince whisking a princess off her feet has given way to narratives where young female royals kick back against their assigned roles. Surely the world cannot possibly need another novel using a plot that, while once revisionist, seems to have become the norm in a post-*Princess Bride* world? When it's a novel as good as *Holes* writer Louis Sachar's first book for adults, that's precisely what the world needs, because *The Magician Of Tiger Castle* is fresh, vivid and often very funny indeed.

In part, the humour is down to the novel's narrator, the wry magician Anatole, a concocter of potions who is immortal — providing he can avoid accidents and mishaps. We first meet him in the contemporary world, posing as a tourist on a visit to Tiger Castle in what was once the southern European kingdom of Esquaveta.

As he begins to relate the tale of Princess Tullia, a young woman whose role in life is to marry Prince Dalrympl of Oxatania, it soon becomes clear Anatole knows much more than any guide about events in the kingdom back in the 16th century. This was a time when Anatole was the renaissance equivalent of a research chemist-cum-medic, a man working out of a smelly workshop, using ingredients we would hardly recognise as efficacious today.

Tullia is someone he's watched grow to become a strong-willed, forthright and intelligent teenager. There's a bond between the two. All of which makes it horribly difficult for Anatole when Tullia falls for a young scribe, Pito. From the perspective of Tullia's parents, Anatole's role as court magician is clear: give Tullia opiates so that she's too stoned to object to her forthcoming nuptials. From Anatole's perspective, matters are further complicated by Pito being his friend.

Cue Anatole working on a potion of forgetting. Better this than a drug-dependent princess. In a book that quietly has much to say about the development of the scientific method, Anatole tries to concoct a recipe that will get the job done without there being unwanted side effects – such as when Pito, Anatole's guinea pig in his experiments, unexpectedly develops a childish voice.

Naturally, nothing goes as planned and Anatole is soon improvising madly to save both his friend and his career, and to protect Tullia from Dalrympl, a privilegedspoilt young man. The misadventures pile up and, at the nadir of his fortunes, Anatole faces the prospect of a close encounter with the big cat that first gave Tiger Castle its name.

The younger Anatole can be a bit of an arse, and he's certainly not a reliable narrator. Yet for all this, he's an immensely attractive figure – an essentially modern man forced to serve dull people moving through the world with an essentially medieval mindset.

Likewise, Pinto and Tullia are bright and sparky. Sachar handles their on-off-on-off romance deftly, something that's important to the way the book functions, because this is, in many ways, a book about how people need to be free to invent themselves.

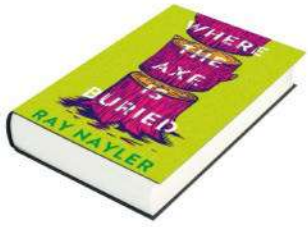
> **"It's fresh, vivid, and often very funny indeed"**

It's also carefully researched, making much of the way that ideas which now seem cranky would once have been at the cutting edge. How will the world of the 21st century, Anatole asks on more than one occasion, look from the perspective of hundreds of years hence? Are you sure you really know how the world works better than your forebears did?

It's a novel that, despite its simple plot, is elegantly written and ambitious.

Jonathan Wright

i Sachar first wrote *Tiger Castle* as a YA book, but ultimately decided that Anatole wouldn't appeal to younger readers.



WHERE THE AXE IS BURIED

★★★★½

RELEASED 14 AUGUST

336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Ray Nayler**

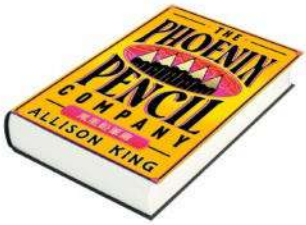
Publisher **W&N**

Ray Nayler follows up two excellent ecological SF novels with this fast-paced dystopian thriller.

Where The Axe Is Buried gives a big picture view of a world in terminal decline. In the authoritarian Federation, a plot is brewing to assassinate the despotic President – harder than it sounds, given that he's able to transfer his consciousness into new bodies. Meanwhile, in a Europe where nations are governed by AI Prime Ministers thanks to a process known as "rationalisation", an emergent new intelligence threatens to destabilise everything.

Nayler's dystopian future is very much extrapolated from our own. Climate change may be somewhat under control, but other threats – an ever-more-intrusive surveillance state, nightmarish autonomous drone technology, and poverty on a mass scale – all feel close to home. Society isn't working for anyone, and even the immortal president is sick of it all.

You could see it as a bitingly cynical book – one that suggests that things will get very much worse before they get better – but the last part of that sentence is important too. As the book points out, all systems fail in the end, and all societies crumble. There's hope for something better here, buried amid the rubble of the old world. **Will Salmon**



THE PHOENIX PENCIL COMPANY

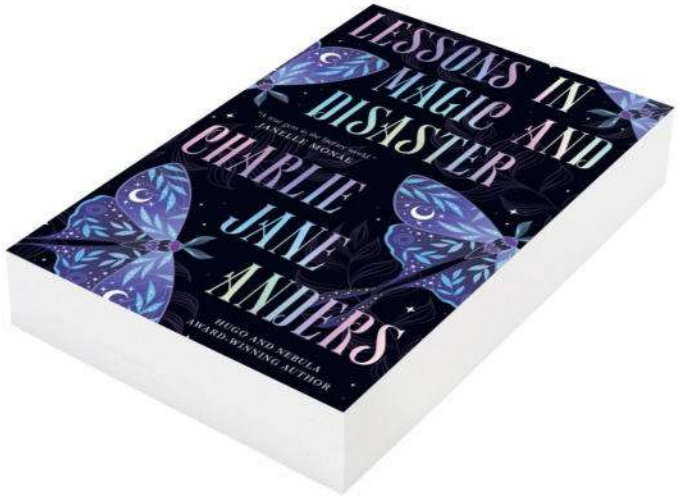
★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
368 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Allison King**
Publisher **4th Estate**

Nobody writes with a pencil any more; that's why computer nerd Monica is more comfortable with a keyboard. Her grandmother Yun, however, has an affinity with the humble writing implement – she used to run a pencil-making business in post-war Shanghai. She could *also* magically know everything a pencil had written by sticking it into her arm, "bleeding out" its words. A good skill to have if you want to be a spy...

Most of this novel takes place in the US in 2018, as Monica worries about her ailing grandmother while growing closer to a new friend, the charismatic Louise. Yun, meanwhile, fighting off Alzheimer's disease, writes letters to a long-lost cousin back in Shanghai. We discover that she once used her magical powers to spy for China: first to defeat the invading Japanese, then later in an attempt to overthrow the Communists.

So this is both a lesbian love story and a Chinese history lesson, with the two threads entwining sublimely. Characters are clearly drawn – particularly Monica and Louise through their text conversations, which feel real and vibrant. The book's fantastical elements may have landed it in the pages of *SFX*, but the real magic here is in the way we fall more in love with this family with every turning page. **Jayne Nelson**



LESSONS IN MAGIC AND DISASTER

Magic And Loss

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 19 AUGUST
308 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Charlie Jane Anders**
Publisher **Titan Books**

Helping a loved one navigate inconsolable grief can take many forms: silent support, practical help, offering empathy... But have you ever considered teaching them magic? While maybe not thinking too carefully about what someone in such desperate pain might want to do with that magic?

Meet Jamie, a woman who's used magic spells to help her through life since her teens. She's kept them a secret from everyone – including her spouse, Ro – but now hopes that sharing this magic with her mother may help Serena rejoin the world, six years on from the death of her wife Mae.

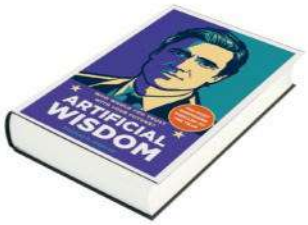
It's a noble plan which, as you'd expect, goes very wrong. Serena is drawn to larger, more powerful spells than Jamie has ever tried, while Jamie herself finds that she may be rebuilding her relationship with her surviving mother at the expense of that with her partner. Meanwhile she's also trying to deal with the stresses of an academic career, researching 18th century author Sarah Fielding (sister of Henry) and her works while teaching students who are often more interested in being antagonistic towards a feminist perspective than the knowledge she's trying to impart.

Lessons... is a very queer novel: Jamie is trans, her spouse is non-binary, and she's the daughter of a lesbian couple. These parts are joyously told, celebrating queer community and solidarity. It's far more a story of relationships than magic; the importance of communication and setting boundaries and the differing loves between partners and between parents and children. It's here, though, that it suffers slightly, with characters talking in "therapy speak" that often doesn't quite feel natural. Jamie is also overly fond of lecturing everyone around her about her pet topics and authors.

It's an intense exploration of love, relationships and childhood, with a solid heart, that doesn't quite hit the mark.

Rhian Drinkwater

i Sarah Fielding wrote the first full-length English children's novel, *The Governess*, first published in 1749.



ARTIFICIAL WISDOM

★★★½☆

RELEASED 14 AUGUST
432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Thomas R Weaver**
Publisher **Bantam**

Like Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry For The Future*, *Artificial Wisdom* begins with a wet-bulb event: a day where the heat and humidity mean the human body can no longer cool itself. But where Robinson used this as a starting point for a philosophical exploration of how we might cope on a heating planet, debut novelist Thomas R Weaver's approach is akin to a near-future thriller.

Could this wet-bulb event have been caused by people meddling with the weather? Investigative journalist Marcus Tully, whose pregnant wife was among the millions who died, wants to find out. Especially as a tip-off suggests that a former US president, Lockwood, may be one of those orchestrating a cover-up over what really happened.

Matters are further complicated by Lockwood being a candidate to become world leader, charged with steering humanity through the climate emergency. It's to Weaver's credit that the idea the race to become global supremo also features an AI never seems too tricksy.

With a plot driven by murder and conspiracies *Artificial Wisdom* zips along, but avoids becoming too rushed or too concerned with end-of-chapter cliffhangers. Superior popular fiction, likely to trouble the bestseller lists, and neatly set up for a sequel. **Jonathan Wright**

THE EXPANSION PROJECT

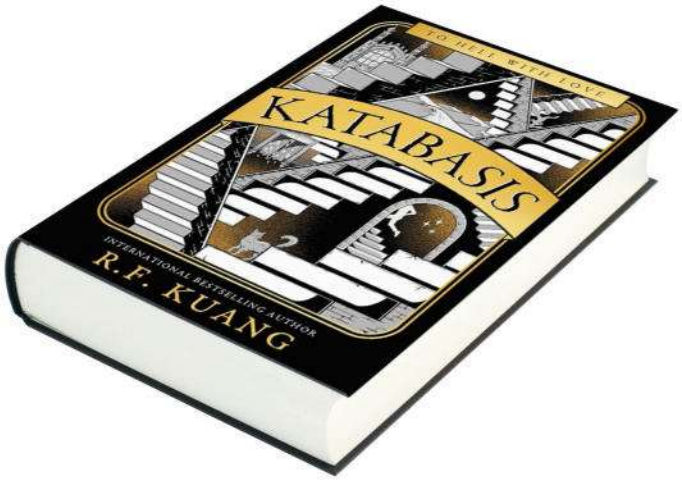
★★★★☆

RELEASED 14 AUGUST
224 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Ben Pester**
Publisher **Granta Books**

Fans of *Severance* will probably get a kick out of this surreal mystery thriller. It's Bring Your Daughter To Work Day, so Tom Crowley does just that, taking young Hen into the office at the Capmeadow Business Park. When Hen vanishes, Tom understandably spirals into panic. Only... no one else in the office remembers Hen. She's not on the CCTV recordings and, when he goes home, she's there, safe and sound. So what gives? Is Tom losing his mind? Or is there something more sinister afoot at Capmeadow?

To say much more about the plot would risk taking away from *The Expansion Project*'s eerie charm. Ben Pester's debut novel pokes fun at corporate culture while also telling an unsettling science fiction story about rampant capitalism given almost Lovecraftian life as Capmeadow continues to grow and grow.

The result is a novel that's uniquely hard to pin down. Just as you think you've got a grasp on where Pester is going with all this, it slips through your fingers again, with notes from an archivist highlighting anomalies and contradictory events. Some may find that frustrating, but give yourself over to *The Expansion Project*'s weirdness and you'll find an unsettling and thought-provoking novel, perfect for discussing in your next stand-up with HR. **Will Salmon**



KATABASIS

Alice In Wonder-Hell

★★★★½

RELEASED 26 AUGUST
560 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **RF Kuang**
Publisher **HarperVoyager**

This is probably going to be a Marmite book. It follows a pair of squabbling academics using historical texts and logic puzzles to journey through Hell (literally), a brutally forbidding land that turns out to be full of academics, and is run along lines that strongly resemble a university.

Alice Law is a PhD student in analytical magick at Cambridge. When her top-of-his-field supervisor dies a messy death in a lab experiment gone wrong, she decides to drag him back out of Hell so he can write the reference she needs to get a job. Along for the ride – to Alice's eyerolling dismay – is her annoyingly charming fellow student and closest rival, Peter.

While sparks do inevitably fly, enemies-to-lovers style, between Alice and Peter (yes, they have to huddle together for warmth), the novel's dominant emotional note is a much heavier one. *Katabasis* is not quite *Imposter Syndrome: The Novel*, but Kuang nails the intoxicating highs and despairing lows of academic life, while using that framework to explore more universal themes. At its heart, this is a story about self-knowledge, self-worth, and the harm we do ourselves and others while seeking both of those things. To put it another way: there's considerably more suicidal ideation here than the "unexpected love story" tagline might suggest.

Kuang's Hell weaves together multiple cultural and literary traditions, but it owes much of its inspiration to Dante's *Inferno* and its literally and spiritually lost

> **"Hell turns out to be full of academics"**

narrator. Alice has a lot of suffering to endure, both physical and mental. The pace is slow, and the focus is fiercely internal, for all the spectacularly imagined landscapes the characters pass through.

Some jarring Americanisms detract from the otherwise finely-crafted world – Alice seems to have imported the structure of US PhD programmes to Cambridge – and it can get info-dumpy, but overall this is an arresting and deeply affecting novel. **Nic Clarke**

i Katabasis is a Greek word that means a descent into the Underworld (or just any journey downwards to a lower place).

THE MIDNIGHT SHIFT

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 14 AUGUST
304 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Cheon Seon-Ran**
Publisher **Bloomsbury**

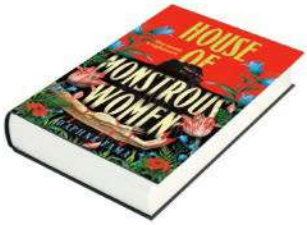
This vampire tale was a hit in its native South Korea, but this English translation gives no clues as to why.

At first glance it's a promising murder mystery: old people are throwing themselves from the top of their care home, yet all are found drained of blood. Investigating the case, Su-Yeon meets the enigmatic Violette, who explains that vampires are real. Shock! Horror!

Except not really, because there's nothing shocking here at all. Huge plot twists, including the deaths of major characters, happen off the page. A subplot involving the young Violette falling in love with a female vampire is embarrassingly childish. The main villain is so underdeveloped that they come out of nowhere and disappear just as quickly.

The translation has wobbles too, with Americanisms mixing with Brit-speech and the occasional jarring moment, such as when a drainpipe is referred to as "a long water pipe connecting to the rooftop" – you can almost feel the translator searching for the correct term and then giving up. But why wasn't it finessed later by someone else?

There are kernels of a good story here: for example, Su-Yeon is a promising lead with an interesting (although mostly unexplored) backstory. But this reads like a desperately earnest fan fiction version of a novel. **Jayne Nelson**



HOUSE OF MONSTROUS WOMEN

★★★★☆

RELEASED 14 AUGUST

336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

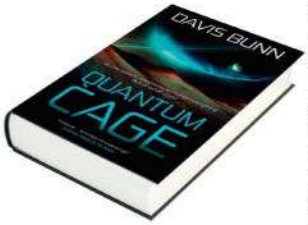
Author **Daphne Fama**

Publisher **Bantam Books**

Ever had a nightmare about an aswang trailing its guts over your body while you sleep? Well, you probably will after you read this brilliantly evocative (and gory) gothic confection of a novel.

In a rural village in the Philippines, Josephine's prospects feel desperately limited. Her parents were murdered by the authoritarian regime and her brother moved to Manila to seek his fortune, leaving her to tend the family home. She's queer, but she knows she'll likely have to marry a local man. Hope arrives in the form of a letter from childhood friend Hiraya: Josephine is invited to play a game, and if she wins, her prize will be a wish.

Of course, the game turns deadly. Hiraya lives in a house full of monsters, and the price of survival is cruelly high. Debut novelist Daphne Fama skilfully conjures the horror of Josephine's plight, both in terms of the immediate danger (bugs, murderous servants, hungry shapeshifters) and the bigger picture (living under fascism, poverty, homophobia). The mythology of the titular house is complex but not overwhelming, and Fama's prose is horribly sensory; Josephine smells as much horror as she sees. And the aswang and its innards? Yeah, this book's imagery will stay with you. **Sarah Dobbs**



QUANTUM CAGE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

192 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Davis Bunn**

Publisher **Severn House**

Not much longer than a novella, this quantum mechanics-inspired thriller wastes little time embroiling its protagonist, recently bereaved accountant Darren Costa, in a top-secret research project. A scientist friend he hasn't seen in over 30 years is dabbling in some cutting-edge physics (including dark energy, quantum entanglement and second sound), and his experiments have inadvertently made contact with an alien race.

Author Davis Bunn crams plenty of ideas into the short page count, as Darren and his associates try to understand the motives of both the mysterious extraterrestrials and the government agents who'd like a slice of the action. There are also echoes of *Flatliners* as the test subjects' consciousness "transits" across the universe, returning a split-second later with strange new memories to decipher. Are those super-advanced equations a *Contact*-style gift from the cosmos, or something more sinister?

Brevity isn't always a good thing, however, and it feels like crucial character beats have been the victim of an over-zealous edit – the bond between Darren and his trio of estranged best mates is only powerful because the book keeps spelling out that it is. And as new information about the aliens is drip-fed on each transit the storytelling becomes rather repetitive – passive, even – before fizzling out in a so-so conclusion. **Richard Edwards**

SECRET LIVES OF THE DEAD

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 26 AUGUST

336 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Tim Lebbon**

Publisher **Titan Books**

You could sum up the plot of this crime thriller/horror in two words: daddy issues.

Seventeen years ago, Jodi's father was killed by his partner, Lem, after a robbery went awry. Now, she's determined to steal a long-lost antique before Lem can, to avenge her dad.

Thing is, Lem's on a quest to avenge *his* dead dad. He believes there's a curse on his bloodline that can only be lifted by acquiring a set of witchy relics – and the one Jodi's got is the final piece of the puzzle.

Psychologically, then, there should be plenty to get your teeth into here, as Jodi finds herself becoming more selfish and ruthless in her quest to thwart Lem. But the book spends so much time trying to pretend there's going to be some supernatural shenanigans that there isn't really space for proper character development.

More damningly, the prose style feels self-conscious and clumsy, stumbling through routine action sequences and then completely falling on its face during the most profound scenes. It's frustrating, especially when the moment that should have been the climax of the whole story just gets lost, dropped into the void between the end of one chapter and the start of the next.

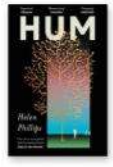
Maybe Freud would've had a field day – but if you're after a decent spooky thriller, look elsewhere. **Sarah Dobbs**

REISSUES

This month's big-name title is Alan Moore's **THE GREAT WHEN** (★★★★☆, 1 September, Bloomsbury). Set in 1949, its hapless protagonist is Dennis, an 18-year-old working in a second-hand book shop

who comes across a novel from the Great When – a magical shadow-London where concepts are incarnated as living beings. Soon he finds himself in the city's occult underbelly, negotiating sorcerers, gangsters and murderers. We said: "A fascinatingly strange book... subverts its traditional adventure narrative in ways that are both compelling and sometimes frustrating." Meg Shaffer's **THE LOST STORY** (★★★★★, out now, Arcadia) is centred on two boys who went missing in a forest in Virginia, reappearing without

explanation six months later. Fifteen years on, one is an expert in locating missing persons. His latest case will require returning to the forest, and re-entering the magical realm he passed into there. We said: "The psychology at the heart of the book is its biggest triumph... The central mystery is unspooled with cheerful self-awareness and wit." Finally, Helen Phillips' **HUM** (★★★★☆, 4 September, Atlantic) is set in a near-future city populated by super-intelligent robots (the titular "hums"). It follows May, a mother



who splurges on a family holiday to the botanical gardens, but finds it's not the idyll she was hoping for... We said: "As a portrait of people slowly losing it in a consumerist surveillance hellscape, this is weirdly nail-biting."

BULLET TIME

A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS

AMIGUWHOMI

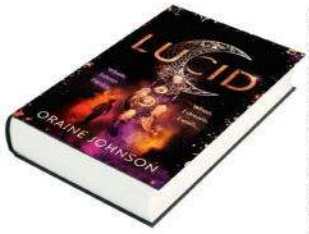
RELEASED 21 AUGUST

192 pages | **Paperback/ebook**

Author **Liz Ward**

Publisher **BBC Books**

- Ami-gu-what-now? It's a mash-up of amigurumi, which are small crocheted toys, and *Doctor Who*.
- Includes 18 amigurumi patterns, ranging from the Fifteenth Doctor in three outfits to the Master, Missy and Sutekh.
- There are also 17 mini amigurumi: smaller/cuter.
- Basic doll patterns in both sizes mean you can create more characters yourself.
- It's not just toys: "apparel and cosplay" includes a celery brooch and Fourth Doctor scarf; "homeware" a Cyberman cushion and a K-9 doorstop.
- There's a small techniques section, but no "how to crochet" guide, plus we spotted a couple of small errors in the Sixth Doctor mini, so this is one for more experienced crocheters.



LUCID

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

432 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Oraine Johnson**

Publisher **Gollancz**

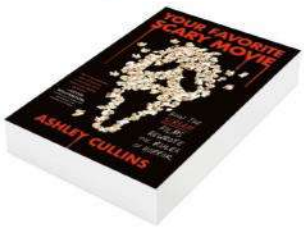
Set in a near-future Birmingham in a dis-United Kingdom, *Lucid* is a YA urban fantasy that gives the chosen one genre a *Supacell*-style makeover.

Afro-proud skateboarder and rap fan Joseph Jacobs is experiencing dreams that increasingly cross over into reality. That reality includes a serial killer, gang warfare, corrupt cops and body-stealing demons, and Joseph's dreams lead him down a dangerous and possibly cataclysmic path to face an ancient evil.

Lucid is an exercise in style over substance. Plot-wise there's nothing new here, but for the first half of the book that doesn't matter. The Gen Z lingo, sassy characters and street settings have a fresh, contemporary vibe that rejuvenates the well-worn material. A prose style that captures the rhythm of action movies, liberally punctuated with an array of bizarre literary sound effects ("rattattattatta", "clink sslinch", "bib... bib... bib..." etc) and some playful typesetting all add to the fun.

But as the fantasy elements take over, the book becomes less interesting. Joseph's Obi-Wan-style mentor (name withheld for spoiler reasons) delivers reams of clumsy "from the dawn of time"-style exposition of the type that was having the piss taken out of it decades ago.

This is the first in a series. Hopefully subsequent books can get back to that initial drip vibe. **Dave Golder**



YOUR FAVORITE SCARY MOVIE

★★★★½

RELEASED 19 AUGUST

340 pages | **Paperback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Ashley Cullins**

Publisher **Plume**

You have to take your hat off to Ashley Cullins, author of this history of the *Scream* franchise, because a staggering amount of work has gone into it. She spoke to an impressive number of cast and crew (we're talking 80 hours of audio), from producers to the voice of Ghostface. At one point *Meryl Bloody Streep* even pops up.

Wes Craven's 1996 original takes up about a quarter. It's a readable account, and though there's the expected amount of actorly gushing, this isn't a whitewash. DoP Mark Irwin, sacked from the first film, has his say, claiming it was down to politics. *Scream 2* and *Scream 3* emerge as chaotic affairs, where script pages were delivered the night before shooting. And producer Iya Labunka doesn't mince words on Dimension Films' Bob Weinstein, remarking that managing this "bully" was her full-time job.

The only major omission is the late director, who gets minimal representation via archival quotes. It says a lot that this doesn't matter. You still get a clear sense of the man, with one chapter entirely dedicated to moving tributes.

The book assumes a lot of knowledge, foregoing detailed synopses on the assumption you'll remember every plot twist. But if you're not a *Scream* superfan, don't be put off: just pair it with a marathon rewatch. **Ian Berriman**

ALSO OUT

There are many more books we couldn't fit in – let's start by sliding one out of the teetering Jenga pile of romantasy, shall we? Brigid Kemmerer's **WARRIOR PRINCESS ASSASSIN** (14 August, HarperVoyager) centres on a marriage alliance between a king whose fire magic has left his kingdom burning out of control, and a princess whose family can manipulate the weather. First in a trilogy, Brian D McLaren's **THE LAST VOYAGE** (out now, Hodder) is set in 2056 and centres on attempts by a crack team of scientists, engineers and ecologists to establish a colony on Mars. This month's Adrian Tchaikovsky book (does he ever sleep?) is **THE HUNGRY GODS** (14 August, Solaris). Described as a "dark apocalyptic thriller", it sees a survivor teaming up with a fallen god to get revenge on the other gods who killed her tribe. The latest entry in *Doctor Who* novella series *Icons* (aimed at ages 8+) is **ONE NIGHT ONLY** (21 August, BBC Children's Books). Written by Clarke Award winner Tade Thompson, it pairs the Fourth Doctor with Nigerian musician Fela Kúti. Terrance Dicks never thought of that. Marking the caving horror's 20th anniversary, **THE MAKING OF THE DESCENT** (21 August, Telos) draws on extensive interviews with cast and crew, plus director Neil Marshall's own notes and photographs. Finally, there's a new edition of Alan Barnes and Marcus Hearn's essential reference **THE HAMMER STORY** (2 September, Titan), which now has 32 extra pages on the revived studio's output since 2007.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Charlie Jane Anders

The Hugo, Locus and Nebula awards winner is powered by P-Funk

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

I love writing to music! My usual go-to soundtrack, for as long as I can remember, is old-school funk and soul music. Put on some Parliament-Funkadelic, and I can get lost in my creative process for hours. In recent years, I've branched out and will write to all kinds of music.

How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?

I don't believe writers' block exists – it's a vague term that covers a dozen different things. Maybe you painted yourself into a corner or got bored with what you're writing. Also, some procrastination is helpful: taking a long walk is better for my writing progress than being chained to my keyboard. That said, I have a rule: no social media during work hours.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

I feel like each book is challenging in its own way. *The City In The Middle Of The Night* stands out, because it took so long to work out the worldbuilding of humans living on a tidally-locked planet. I couldn't write the story until I understood the setting.

Do you have any "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

My biggest problem as a writer is also one of my strengths: I can write silly, absurdist stuff pretty easily. I've worked hard to keep the surreal humour in my writing from getting in the way of the story.

> "I wish I'd read more broadly as a kid but I was a picky reader"

Were you a keen reader as a child? Which books were your favourites?

I wish I'd read more broadly as a kid. I read the Target *Doctor Who* paperbacks obsessively, and I had other favourites, like [Madeleine L'Engle's] *A Wrinkle In Time*, [Norton Juster's] *The Phantom Tollbooth* and all of Douglas Adams. But I was a picky reader. I wish I could go back in time and convince my young self to give Terry Pratchett a try.

Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?

It's so hard to pick, but *The Buffalo Hunter Hunter* by Stephen Graham Jones lives rent-free in my head. Jones takes vampires in a radically different direction, in the service of a brutally haunting story about colonialism and mass extinction.

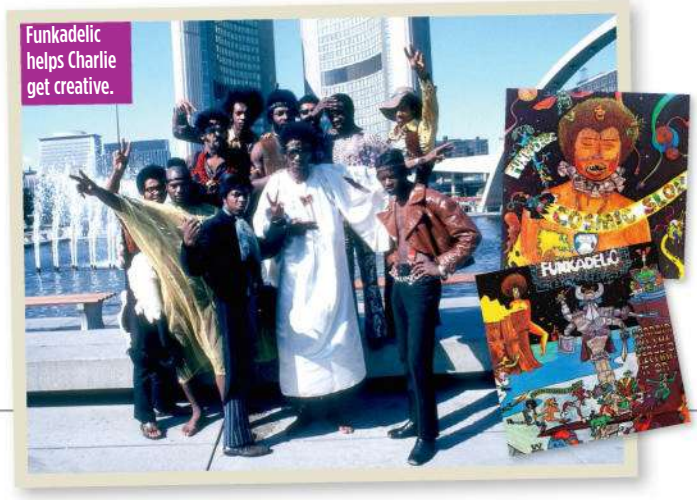
What would you say is the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?

Probably that you spend all your time writing, when the job actually requires a lot of people skills and organisation. You're basically running a small business.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've either received or read?

Early in my career, an editor at a literary magazine spent an hour on the phone telling me to work harder on finding the emotional core of a story: the thing the characters keep coming back to, the thing the reader will care most about. That's stuck with me ever since.

LESSONS IN MAGIC AND DISASTER
"A true gem in the literary world." JANELLE MONÁE
CHARLIE JANE ANDERS
HUGO AND NEBULA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY

Lessons In Magic And Disaster by Charlie Jane Anders is out in paperback and ebook on 19 August, published by Titan Books.

SUPERMAN UNLIMITED

Between a rock and a hard place

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Dan Slott**
Artist **Rafael Albuquerque**

ISSUES 1-3 **Comic-book publishers** making the most of blockbuster movie adaptations is a classic move, and DC is wisely riding the coat-tails of James Gunn's *Superman* with a series that offers a fresh jumping-on point for new readers. *Superman Unlimited* also marks the first DC project from writer Dan Slott, who's spent most of his career writing Marvel's biggest characters.

The series kicks off with the Man of Steel trying to stop a massive asteroid of pure Kryptonite from crash-landing on Earth. This attempt ultimately fails, meaning that the previously rare green mineral is now available to any low-level criminal who wants a chance at killing Superman. These first three issues firmly establish this new status quo, and throw in a bunch of big set-pieces and interesting plot twists (including the discovery that Kryptonite could be a world-saving energy source).

A veteran of writing colourful superhero action, Dan Slott keeps the pace admirably high in these opening issues, all while serving up the brightly optimistic tone you'd expect from someone with his experience and this subject matter. He also has a good handle on Superman's character, giving us plenty of moments that explore Kal-El's innate goodness (even when the new abundance of Kryptonite is testing his resolve).

The dialogue, however, does verge on the broad and clunky at times, while Slott's good storytelling decisions (such as an adorable single-issue tale focusing on super-dog Krypto) are countered by a bunch of perplexing ones (like a bizarre amount of focus on oddball Steve Ditko-created character the Creeper). Slott also arguably overdoes the "make it new reader-friendly" approach in the first issue, giving readers an excessive 11-page recap of Superman's entire history.

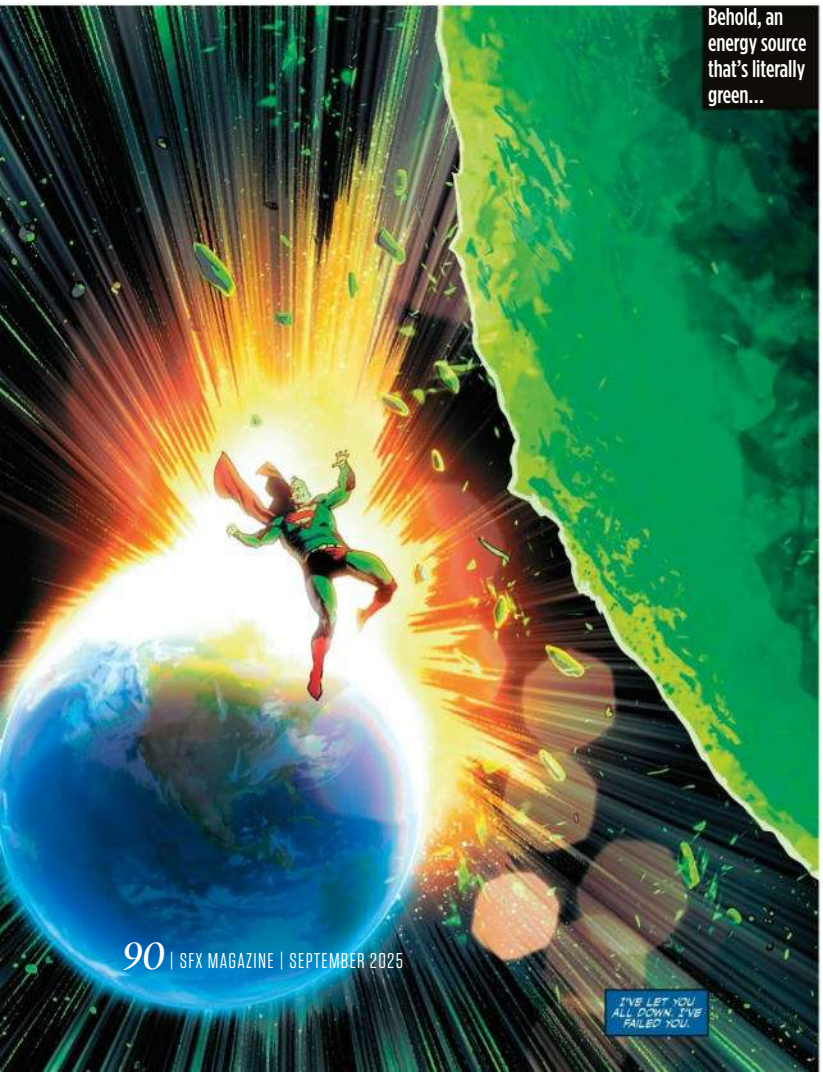
This haphazardness is echoed in the visuals from Rafael Albuquerque. He's a brilliant comic artist who's great at capturing energy on the page, but he also has a graphic, angular style that isn't always a natural fit for something as bright and upbeat as Superman.

> "The brightly optimistic tone you'd expect"

As a result, Alburquerque's character expressions can sometimes feel strange and off-putting (especially in the more comedic moments), although he does still hit the right level of iconic wonder when it counts.

These first three issues end up as an intriguing, if occasionally frustrating, mix of promising ingredients that doesn't always cohere, but does deliver plenty of good-natured fun.

While Slott and Albuquerque haven't pulled off a slam-dunk of a series launch, then, there's still enough potential here for *Superman Unlimited* to head in some lively and entertaining directions. **Saxon Bullock**



i Kryptonite first appeared in "The Meteor From Krypton", a 1943 episode of radio show *The Adventures Of Superman*.

SUPERGIRL

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer/artist **Sophie Campbell**

ISSUES 1-3 **After cameoing in** her cousin's new movie, Supergirl is joined in this new monthly not only by Krypto but also Streaky the Cat, who'd make a fine addition to her own upcoming film.

Aimed at a similar audience to the teenage Kara, it sees her returning to her hometown of Midvale, only to discover she's been supplanted as Supergirl by jealous Kandorian Lesla-Lar – who has her own sidekick in Kandy the Superbunny.

Teaming up with Lex Luthor's estranged daughter Lena, Kara's positivity is almost her chief superpower; she takes setbacks in her stride as even her adoptive parents don't recognise her, before very nearly succumbing to her dark side as Satan Girl.

While there are some obligatory fights, such as one with Titano the Super-Ape, Kara mostly relies on her wits and emotions to solve her problems, ultimately sympathising with Lesla-Lar's deep-seated insecurity.

Heavily reliant on thought balloons, Sophie Campbell often over-explains what can be surmised from her sharply-designed layouts. There are some nice visual moments, such as when Kara tries on a series of costumes, strikingly illustrated by Campbell, whose expressive linework is vibrantly coloured by Tara Bonvillain.

The stakes are low but – especially with the Super-Pets set to take centre-stage in issue five – this series certainly brings all the fun. **Stephen Jewell**

FREE PLANET

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Image Comics**
- Writer **Aubrey Sitterson**
- Artist **Jed Dougherty**

ISSUES 1-3 **It's always good to** see a comic that's using its medium as creatively as possible, and *Free Planet* is doing this with style, delivering a sci-fi saga that's packed almost to bursting with concepts and lore.

The story revolves around the resource-rich colony planet of Lutheria, which has declared itself fully independent after decades of exploitation and a recent war. Now a group of war heroes have banded together to help the planet keep its freedom, but external threats and interpersonal conflict are going to make the process increasingly difficult...

A colourful space opera that's unashamedly political, *Free Planet* is also unafraid to be the kind of comic that demands multiple reads. The ideas-per-page ratio in these first three issues is massive, with writer Aubrey Sitterson and artist Jed Dougherty throwing in as much intrigue, dense world-building and storytelling experimentation as they can get away with.

Dougherty's cartoony, attention-grabbing art is also impressive, showcasing wildly imaginative double-page layouts and distinctive character designs alongside gorgeously lurid visuals.

Heady, demanding and ambitious, *Free Planet* has a couple of wobbly storytelling moments, and is not going to be for everyone – but those who get onto its admirably bonkers wavelength are in for a fascinating ride. **Saxon Bullock**

Doctor Doom and Sister Sorrow, alike in alliteration.

BRING ON THE BAD GUYS

The Maleficent Seven

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writers/artists **Various**

ISSUES 1-3 **Echoing the 1976** collection of the same name, this interlinked sequence of one-shots chronicles the origins of the same seven supervillains.

Bookended by a battle between the Latverian dictator and Mephisto over mystical daggers, it gets off to a strong start with a feature-length, Doom-focused opening issue. Marc Guggenheim's script drips with tension – and is enhanced by Stefano Raffaele's atmospheric, detailed art. He draws the Six Lords of Darkness from all corners of the Marvel Universe, before dispatching them all too quickly.

So it's disappointing when Guggenheim is relegated to back-ups for the subsequent two issues. Evocatively illustrated by Michael Sta Maria, these recount the early days of Sister Sorrow, a promisingly sinister new character.

Ethan S Parker and Griffin Sheridan's unsettling account of Norman Osborn's first kill as Green Goblin has little to do with the main narrative, although there's a pleasingly solid quality to Matteo Della Fonte's art.

There's more intrigue to Philip Kennedy Johnson's Abomination issue, featuring sinewy linework by Sergio Davila and Aure Jimenez. Johnson emphasises Emil Blonsky's spycraft as much as his Hulk-like monster abilities, before ending with a devastating twist.

While the heroes aren't missed, this uneven series so far follows a path that's too well-worn, but with Loki, Red Skull and Dormammu to come hopefully it can find new ground before Doom and Mephisto renew hostilities.

Stephen Jewell

i Written by Stan Lee, the first *Bring On The Bad Guys* was illustrated by the likes of Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko and John Buscema.

THE SLUDGE!

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **14 AUGUST**
- Publisher **Rebellion**
- Writer **E George Cowan**
- Artists **Ernest Kearon, Bill Lacey**

COLLECTION **Like all the most** fashionable menaces of the atomic age, the star of this '60s strip from British weekly *Lion* is birthed by the power of the bomb: in this case radioactive dust that mingles with volcanic vapours to turn a mass of weed into a shambling gloop-beast with wanton destruction on its mind. Listen, it's more common than you might imagine...

Illustrated in urgent, moody style by *Lion* mainstay Bill Lacey, the first story in this reprint collection trades in spectacle worthy of a disaster flick, delivering bridge collapses and exploding trains against an atmospheric Canadian backdrop.

Two local newspapermen are theoretically our heroes but it's the eerie, indestructible Sludge who captivates, wordless but never mindless – one cherishable panel finds the creature studying a library book with sinister intent. It also has the power to possess everything from dinosaur statues to Egyptian mummies, which keeps things interesting when the property damage palls.

Lacey encores in a vividly-coloured tale from the 1967 *Lion Annual*, before Ernest Kearon takes on art chores for two stories that pit the monster against the weekly's star attraction Robot Archie. It's a witty match, a clash of personal aesthetics: the straight lines and hard, shiny surfaces of ol' tin-bonce versus the moist, squelchy evil of the Sludge. **Nick Setchfield**

DEATH STRANDING 2: ON THE BEACH

Play It Again (As Sam)

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PS5**

Publisher **Sony**

VIDEOGAME **Eras, trends and** consoles may come and go, but Japanese games designer Hideo Kojima remains a constant, and he hasn't got any more restrained with age. Set about a year after the original, *Death Stranding 2* returns us to the boots of post-apocalyptic postman Sam Porter Bridges (a grunting Norman Reedus).

Called out of retirement by Fragile (Léa Seydoux) to be America's ambassador to survivors in Mexico and Australia, Sam finds old foes and allies reemerging on the way, linked by a conspiracy that adds dark layers to an initially simple mission.

Kojima's eccentric writing – combining high-octane action, unembarrassed melodrama and baffling segues – is in full force. By the time the credits roll you're more likely to be bewildered by the narrative than anything else, and the effort needed to decipher it probably wouldn't be worth it.

Mileage may vary depending on your affection for Kojima's style, especially as *On The Beach* is full of homages and references to his own work – no era of which looms larger than *Metal Gear Solid V*.

Death Stranding 2 is more of an action game than its predecessor, with the package delivery partly played down for increased combat sequences. It's the strongest part of the experience, especially in low-stakes encounters when you can freely experiment with the weirder toys in your arsenal.

But even in peacetime, the simple, meditative act of trekking the gorgeously rendered outback is satisfying – though it's a shame how much vehicles can end up diluting the challenge of travel once they're introduced.

So though it struggles with the difficulty curve and the story frequently devolves into nonsense, *Death Stranding 2*'s strong core mechanics and sumptuous world ultimately make it worth the price of admission. **Joel D Franey**

i The game features numerous cameos, including director Mike Flanagan and Scottish synth-pop band Chvrches.

Awwww, isn't he cute? And the baby's alright too.

MECHA BREAK

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PC**

Also on **Xbox Series X/S**

Publisher **Amazing Seasun Games**

VIDEOGAME **If you've ever** wanted to climb into a huge mech that can swing giant swords and shoot charged laser cannons while getting around on jet boosts, then *Mecha Break* is the game for you. It also really sells the fantasy of piloting one of these awesome machines, as there's just as much emphasis on creating your own human avatar (if sometimes a bit too much emphasis, to the point of ogling).

Mechs can belong to an intimidatingly hardcore genre, but this simplifies things as a class-based third-person shooter. You've got 12 mechs to choose from at the start, each with their own unique weapons and skills that fit the classic melee, sniper, tank and support archetypes. It's perhaps a more approachable shooter since you're equipped with a targeting radar system, though each mech also has defensive measures to stay alive – including Alysnes, which auto-resurrects itself into a more powerful form.

The team-based modes will be quite familiar if you've played any hero shooter in the past decade, but a separate mode where you explore a larger map, fighting AI and human enemies for loot, adds another dimension for depth. Just beware that, as a free-to-play game, it will frequently try to nickel and dime you with microtransactions, though these are mostly just cosmetic. **Alan Wen**

SMITH AND SULLIVAN: REUNITED

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
231 minutes | **Download**
Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **It's surprising,** given how thoroughly Big Finish has mined *Doctor Who*'s spin-off possibilities, that it's never attempted a series based on 1981's TV special *K-9 And Company*. *Smith and Sullivan: Reunited* isn't quite a continuation of that one-off, but does feel like a successor. Elisabeth Sladen's daughter Sadie Miller steps into the role of Sarah Jane Smith, with Christopher Naylor filling the late Ian Marter's shoes as fellow Fourth Doctor companion Harry Sullivan.

In "The Caller", a serial killer has been leaving a trail of bodies in phone boxes around '80s London. Sarah is on the case when her investigation reunites her with Harry. In "Union Of The Snake", Sarah is undercover, posing as a PA for a tech mogul whose new computer chip may have an alien origin. Finally, "Blood Type" is a slice-of-life story that explores how Sarah makes her living.

It's all as lighthearted as the Europop theme tune, but charming with it. "The Caller" is the strongest of the stories, economically hinting at how isolated Sarah and Harry have grown. Crucially, Miller and Naylor offer believable new takes on the leads which pay homage to the original actors without simply impersonating them. **Will Salmon**

DOCTOR WHO: SNARE

Another Green World

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
55 minutes | **CD/download**
Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Christopher** Eccleston has been recording new *Doctor Who* adventures with Big Finish for a good five years now. *Snare*, however, marks the first time that the audio company has teamed up the Ninth Doctor with Billie Piper's Rose Tyler. The result is like taking a trip in the TARDIS right back to 2005.

Snare is the first of 12 new adventures (being released bi-monthly) that slot neatly into that magical first season after the events of "Father's Day". Rose is still emotionally wrung out after having her dad die in her arms, so she has returned with the Doctor to the Powell Estate to enjoy some down time.

Also home after some time away is Kevin (Alex Austin), one of Rose's old mates, here to clear out the flat belonging to his late father, a local eccentric nicknamed Spider. While there, however, Kevin discovers a portal to a strange other world full of sinister alien vegetation.

> **"There's a real joy in hearing the Ninth Doctor, Rose and her mum Jackie"**

It's honestly a little eerie just how well *Snare* recaptures the tone of its era. Some of that is down to the cast, of course. There's a real joy in hearing the Ninth Doctor, Rose and her mum Jackie (Camille Coduri) together again after all these years and sounding more or less unchanged.

Setting the action in the Powell Estate is also a smart move. It locates the story in its specific era while also enabling writer Tim Foley to expand on Rose's backstory. He draws connections between her recent loss and Kevin's own complicated relationship with his father.

The result is a character-driven play that feels of its era, without simply being a nostalgia trip. Combined with well-considered real-world themes and a creepy alien threat, this makes it the ideal set-up for the rest of this entirely unexpected but very exciting season-within-a-season. **Will Salmon**

i In the TV series, location filming for the Powell Estate primarily took place at the Brandon Estate, in Kennington.

SKY

★★★½☆

RELEASED **SEPTEMBER**
22 minutes | **Vinyl/CD/download**
Publisher **Buried Treasure**

SOUNDTRACK **Written by K-9** creators Bob Baker and Dave Martin, HTV's *Sky* is a classic example of the sort of children's TV whose oblique strangeness still haunts Generation X. Its titular blue-eyed youth is a telepathic "traveller" who's somehow materialised in the wrong time period (1975). While searching for the way out (which turns out to be Stonehenge, natch), he comes under attack from nature – much as an antibody might reject a virus.

Composer Eric Wetherell is not a well-known name. His work here is ominous, fittingly off-kilter (verging on avant-garde), and often rather sparse, with recurring elements: harpsichord stabs, creeping glockenspiel, and dully booming kettle drums.

The few cues which employ electronics make the strongest impression – such as "The Animus Attacks", with its heartbeat pulsing and synthetic approximations of wind howl, designed to accompany angry squalls of leaves. The 26 tracks include six unused ones – much of a muchness with the rest.

The vinyl edition is an "ice blue" (turquoise) 10", and comes with a postcard and A3 poster – one side of which features the series' *Look-In* cover. A desirable artefact – though you struggle to see even the most fervent *Sky* fan coming home after a long day, kicking off their shoes and dropping the needle. **Ian Berriman**

SEPTEMBER 1969

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"Rikes!" Scoob and the gang make their TV debut.

FLASHBACK

Fright Said Fred

13 SEPTEMBER 1969 Arriving in the twilight of the hippy era, *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* carried a distinct whiff of the counterculture. Obligatory speculation over the illicit properties of the 'toon hound's beloved snacks aside, it's easy to imagine that the psychedelically-adorned Mystery Machine had taken a long, strange detour down America's spookiest backroads shortly after Woodstock.

In fact the ghoul-chasing gang were nearly bona fide rock 'n' rollers. CBS wanted another Saturday morning hit after the success of *The Archie Show*, an animated series showcasing the adventures of a bubblegum pop group. Hanna-Barbera hired Joe Ruby and Ken Spears to create something in the same groovy vein. Iwao Takamoto, veteran of such Disney classics as *Cinderella* and *Lady And The Tramp*, provided character design.

The band was to be called Mysteries Five – also the projected title of the series before it briefly became *Who's S-S-Scared?* – complete with a bongo-playing dog named Too Much (as in hippy slang for "Overwhelming, man!"). Ultimately the music angle was dropped as the characters were locked down: Fred the hunk, foxy Daphne, bookish Velma and dependable cowardly custards Shaggy and Scoob.

At one point the dog was going to be small and feisty, a version that may have later inspired Scrappy-Doo.

Shaggy was directly inspired by Maynard G Krebs, the beatnik icon played by Bob Denver in sitcom *The Many Loves Of Dobie Gillis*, right down to the scruffy goatee. Zoinks!

Premiere episode "What A Night For A Knight" distills the essence of what would become an everlasting franchise. The gang investigate a seemingly possessed suit of armour only to discover that the fabled Black Knight is in reality local creep Mr Wickles, using rumours of the supernatural to cover up his art-forgery shenanigans. It's a nocturnal, cartoon-gothic world illuminated by headlights and flashlights, where characters yell "L-l-let's get outta here!" to the furious clatter of feet.

Scooby-Doo, Where Are You! wasn't just horror with stabiliser wheels. It was also a vital life lesson in critical thinking. Things are rarely what they seem, and the truth is only ever the tug of a rubber mask away. In a "post-truth" age increasingly in thrall to crackpot theories and shady schemers, a meddling kid remains something to aspire to.

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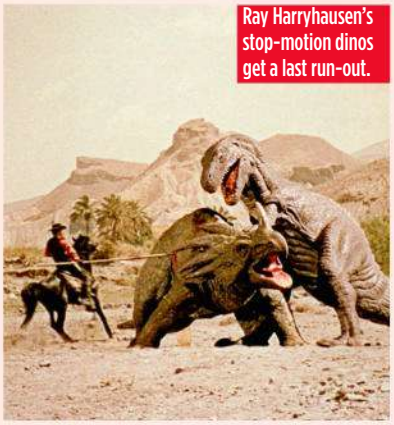


Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion dinos get a last run-out.

Uncanny Valley

3 SEPTEMBER 1969 Ray Harryhausen's final brush with dinosaurs found him unearthing some prehistory of his own.

Pitting cowpokes against extinction-defying beasts from a lost desert gorge, *The Valley Of Gwangi* was originally developed in the early '40s by Harryhausen's mentor, effects genius Willis O'Brien. Then titled *Valley Of The Mists*, it was set to be helmed by *King Kong* co-director Ernest Schoedsack before RKO binned the project after a year of development.

Harryhausen reportedly found O'Brien's original script and storyboards while rummaging in his garage. Sensing the perfect follow-up to his 1966 primeval blockbuster *One Million Years BC*, the king of Dynamation took the idea to longtime production partner Charles H Schneer. With Jim O'Connolly hired as director, filming took place in Almería and Cuenca in Spain, doubling for sun-blasted Mexico.

One unforgettable scene finds four horse-riding cowboys roping Gwangi, the titular allosaurus. Blending live-action photography and frame-by-frame model animation, it was a sequence that took four months to complete.

Released in New York City on 3 September, *The Valley Of Gwangi* fell victim to lacklustre publicity and botched distribution. "I'm always fascinated with Gwangi on how everyone wanted to pick the faults in it," Harryhausen later said. "Very few people mentioned all the virtues of good, sound entertainment."

Harryhausen also blamed the shifting cinematic climate, with the darkening of Hollywood exemplified by the likes of *Easy Rider*, released that summer. While cowboys vs dinosaurs is unquestionably cool, bikers vs dinosaurs would surely have been box-office gold...

© WARNER BROS

SINCE YOU ASKED, IT'S JUST A LITTLE PLACE CALLED EARTH!
OKAY, JOHNNY--WE'VE GOT OUR HOSTAGE--AND WE'VE GOT OUR GUIDE! SO WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?
IF ANYONE STOPS US, WE CAN JUST TELL 'EM WE'RE BONNIE AND CLYDE, OUT FOR A SPIN!
KEEP YOUR GUN ON 'EM, CRYS--I'LL GET US THERE IN NO TIME!
I JUST PRAY WE'RE NOT TOO LATE--TO SAVE BEN GRIMM!

"No one messes with Reed Richards's mob, wise ass!"

© MARVEL COMICS

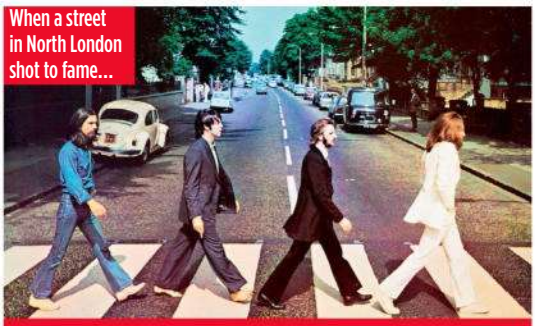
Gangster Tripping

9 SEPTEMBER 1969 "At first I thought this wuz some kinda nutty gag – but it ain't!" declares rockbound hero the Thing in *Fantastic Four* #93.

Captured by a Skrull slaver and forced to compete in an interplanetary gladiatorial arena, the FF's resident muscle finds himself on a planet styled after prohibition-era America, complete with Tommy gun-toting mobsters in pinstriped suits. Say, what's the big idea?

It's a scenario clearly indebted to the *Star Trek* episode "A Piece Of The Action", broadcast the year before. While the Enterprise crew discovered a planet corrupted by a discarded history book, here the inhabitants of Kral worship an Earth gangster known as "Machine-Gun" Martin, abducted to fight in the games.

But artist Jack Kirby had deeper inspirations. He had grown up on New York's Lower East Side in the '20s. This may have been a strange new world to the FF, but for their co-creator it was a familiar one indeed.



When a street in North London shot to fame...

IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** Harold Wilson
- **US President:** Richard Nixon
- **In the charts:** Creedence Clearwater Revival top the chart with future werewolf anthem "Bad Moon Rising".
- **In the news:** A coup in Libya brings Colonel Gaddafi to power; Ho Chi Minh, president of North Vietnam, dies at the age of 79; China carries out an underground nuclear bomb test; The Beatles release Abbey Road; the trial of the Chicago Eight – charged with inciting a riot during the 1968 Democratic National Convention – begins.

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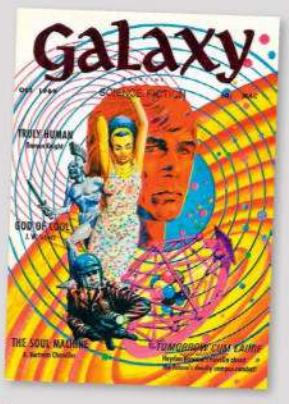
ON THE SHELF



- *Galaxy* continues its serialisation of *Dune Messiah* by Frank Herbert with part four of five. Also yours for 60 cents: stories by Damon Knight and Bob Shaw.

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Blastermind
The SFX quiz

HISTORICAL FIGURES

Sci-fi and fantasy heroes have a habit of bumping into famous people from the past... How many can you remember?

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
In *Star Trek*'s "The Savage Curtain", Kirk and co encounter a familiar face from the 19th century. Name him.

QUESTION 2
Which notorious historical figure summoned up Hellboy?

QUESTION 3
Which actor played Napoleon Bonaparte in *Time Bandits*?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify this historical figure, as seen in *Doctor Who*.

QUESTION 5
In *Life On Mars*, who does Sam Tyler advise to "drive carefully"?

QUESTION 6
Who played Adolf Hitler in both *The Tomorrow People* and *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade*?

QUESTION 7
Which author did Data meet in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* two-parter "Time's Arrow"?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Identify this historical figure, as seen in *Doctor Who*.

QUESTION 9
Which pop singer played Joan of Arc in *Bill And Ted's Excellent Adventure*?

QUESTION 10
Which scientist has popped up in all three of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Star Trek: Voyager* and *Doctor Who*?

QUESTION 11
Which director brought us the 2012 movie *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Identify this historical figure, as seen in *Doctor Who*.

QUESTION 13
A holographic Leonardo da Vinci featured in several episodes of *Star Trek: Voyager*. Which respectful term did Captain Janeway use to address him?

QUESTION 14
In Jonathan Hickman's 2010 comic *SHIELD*, which well-known scientist became a cyborg called Night Machine?

QUESTION 15
Pick out the historical figure who *didn't* appear in an episode of *Legends Of Tomorrow*: PT Barnum, Julius Caesar, Al Capone, Albert Einstein, Ulysses S Grant, Genghis Khan, George Stephenson.

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify this historical figure, as seen in *Doctor Who*.

QUESTION 17
In the *Quantum Leap* episode "Memphis Melody", whose body does Sam Beckett leap into?

QUESTION 18
In the *Supernatural* episode "Time After Time", which lawman does Dean Winchester meet?

QUESTION 19
Who was Sally Potter's rather unconventional casting for the role of Elizabeth I in her film version of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*?

QUESTION 20
Which famous aviator features in the *Star Trek: Voyager* episode "The 37's"?

Answers
1 Abraham Lincoln 2 Grigori Rasputin 3 Ian Holm 4 Emperor Nero 5 Marc Bolan 6 Michael Sheard 7 Mark Twain 8 Charles Dickens 9 Jane Wiedlin 10 Sir Isaac Newton 11 Timur Bekmambetov 12 Vincent van Gogh 13 Maestro 14 Nikola Tesla 15 George Stephenson 16 Lord Byron 17 Elvis Presley 18 Eliot Ness 19 Quentin Crisp 20 Amelia Earhart

How did you do?
Prepare to be judged

0-5
Hang your head in shame

6-10
Nowt special

11-15
Perfectly acceptable

16-19
Give yourself a pat on the back

20
A bit *too* impressive, frankly

PICTURES © BBC

SFX

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"Maybe I just have gay legs"

ipso. Regulated

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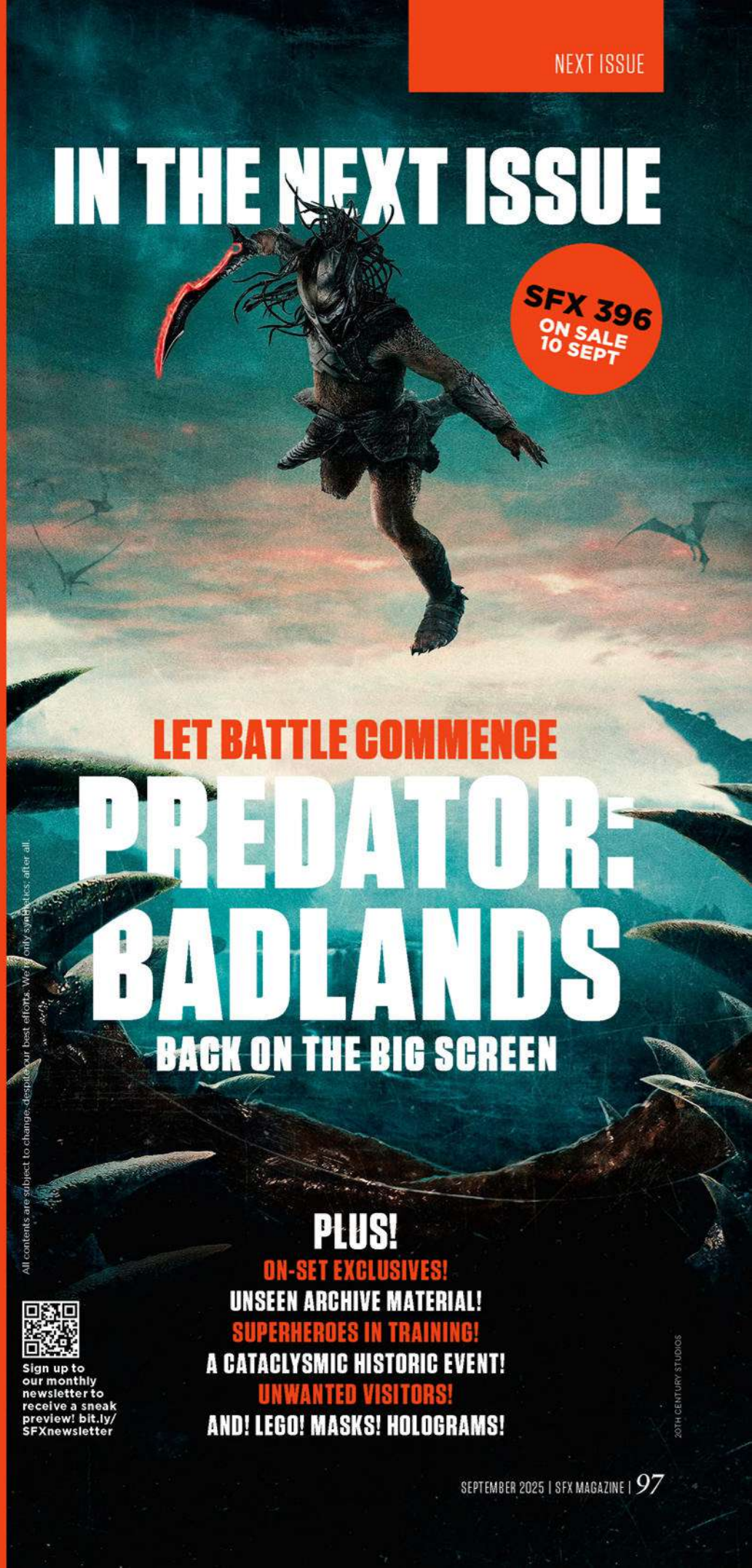

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20TH CENTURY STUDIOS

Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Bucky O'Hare And The Toad Wars!

Dom Carter, freelance writer

Ah yes, the early '90s. An era when a children's cartoon could contain warnings about climate change and AI, and still be a shameless vehicle for hawking action figures at the same time.

That's not hyperbole either. The *Bucky O'Hare* comic was originally created with toys in mind way back in 1978 by writer Larry Hama – look closely and you can even see little holes and pegs in the character design drawings. But I didn't run into the animal adventurers from SPACE (Sentient Protoplasm Against Colonial Encroachment) until early 1992, when they burst onto our screens on CBBC in a 13-episode series that still boasts one of the best theme tunes ever broadcast. And yes, I'm factoring *Round The Twist* into that equation.

In a landscape dominated by *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* (no "ninjas" allowed in the UK at the time), *Bucky O'Hare And The Toad Wars!* stood out as the thinking kid's sugar rush of an animated series. It admirably chose to tell an ongoing story, which followed the upstanding crew of the brilliantly-named Righteous Indignation in their ongoing battle against the evil Toad Empire.

Having only just entered primary school when I first watched *Bucky O'Hare*, most of the storytelling soared right over my head. Instead, I entered the Aniverse like audience surrogate – and at the time bespectacled doppelganger – Willy DuWitt; somewhat confused but utterly fascinated. My enjoyment was buoyed along by my older brother, who had the necessary pester power to strongarm our parents into buying toys of every available character, plus the Toad Croaker and Toad Double Bubble spaceships. Thanks again, Louis.

Does *Bucky O'Hare* hold up in 2025? Somewhat. The quality of the animation was already lagging behind its contemporaries at the time, and some of the writing needs to be dragged into the present, but ideas like a lazy toad population being driven to extremism by artificial intelligence remain both amusing and astonishingly prescient.

Sadly, toys were the making and breaking of *Bucky O'Hare*. Disappointing merchandise sales were part of the reason a second series was never commissioned, even though the finale deliberately rolled the credits on an open-ended note. Maybe if we all buy the classic action figures from eBay it'll get an *X-Men '97*-style revival?

Dom is off to croak us some toads.

Fact Attack!

- Bucky O'Hare was originally called Buck Bunny, until it was pointed out this sounded like a certain *Looney Tunes* character.
- Bucky's surname was a suggestion courtesy of writer Neal Adams's wife Marilyn, during a trip to Chicago's O'Hare airport.
- If he'd had his way, *Bucky O'Hare* comic-book creator Larry Hama would have got The Ramones to do the theme tune for the show.
- During the show's run on CBBC, the intro's lyrics were displayed on-screen, and viewers were encouraged to loudly sing along.
- The spirit of Bucky O'Hare lives on in a range of impressive figures from Boss Fight Studios. Including feline pilot Jenny, finally!

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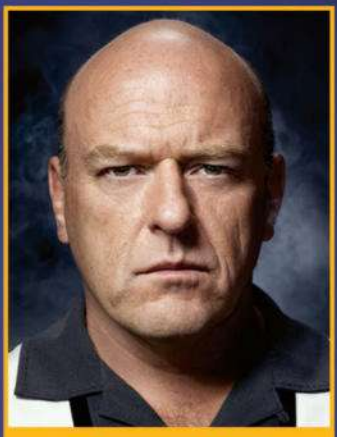

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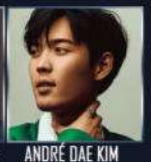

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